

Agile Learning Centers Starter Kit v3.0

Welcome!



AGILE LEARNING CENTERS NETWORK STARTER KIT V3.0

Introduction

You're a visionary committed to young people's self-determination and to shaping more liberated futures! How exciting! We are contributors from a network that includes more than 100 projects around the world. We draw from a history of learning and community education that's older than schools, and our commitment to young people and the future is why we've documented these reflections on our practices to share with you. We hope that what you

learn from others' journeys through these resources will inspire you and help you get started as easily as possible.

Starting a school, cooperative, learning center, youth group, or any new project can feel overwhelming, especially if you don't have experience or have nearby collaborators who have experience building the kind of space you're dreaming about. Transforming an existing project, also a common path for ALC Start-Up groups, may mean needing to compile less paperwork, but it brings its own challenges. Fortunately, as novel as learning centers can seem and as unique as your project will be, organizing to care for growing kids as inherently curious, playful, valuable, whole, and self-determining community members is something people have been doing for ages. Once we stop looking for how to force kids to submit and standardize, we get to start looking for how to set and hold a space where they're free to flourish, to start looking for possibilities and inspiration. Once we recognize that learning is everywhere and we shape our educations by living, we start to find there are many lessons and examples that can support our practice hidden in plain sight, in addition to those in the education-specific books, articles, and podcasts that there seem to be more of each day.

> "All of our young people deserve to enjoy a sense of purpose, the acquisition of real skills, and the opportunity to contribute to the betterment of the community."
>
> Leah Penniman, discussing *Soul Fire Farm*

For our part, Agile Learning Centers are committed to sharing our learning, contributing to and building with the wisdom of the collective, and to the kind of sustainable and powerful growth that's only possible through collaborative relationships. Here we'll offer guidance, reflections, and some templates from facilitators around the world. Take what works for your context; leave what doesn't. There are many more possibilities than just those we'll lay out here, but in this revision of the original Agile Learning Centers Starter Kit we deliberately incorporate more stories from experienced facilitators in different kinds of ALC projects and in different places, in the hope that doing so inspires bolder and broader imagining of what is...and what is possible.

This document assumes some familiarity with self-directed education and the Agile Learning Centers approach to it. For more introductory material, check out the content at self-directed.org and at agilelearningcenters.org. That said, there's nothing like the sensory and relational experience of spending time in such an environment. If visiting an ALC, attending a training / event or similar space is at all possible, it'd be invaluable for members

of your founding team – potentially including interested young people – to go, connect, and see what you can learn.

 **What is Self-Directed Education?** https://youtu.be/3g1zlU5vbMk

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Acknowledgments/Gratitudes

This guide wouldn't be possible without the team of facilitators who offered their stories, insights, feedback, editing, translating, and visuals. Abby Oulton, who did most of this version's rewriting and expanding, and Rubén Alvarado, who did much of this version's story-gathering and managed the translation into Spanish, offer deep gratitude to Ceci Ruiz, Diego Vazquez, Ryan Shollenberger, Amber Sawyer, and Tomis Parker for their comments on our drafts. We thank those who took the time to share their stories with us and to offer reflections on what kind of content would have been most useful in their early days. We acknowledge each other as collaborators whose love of play includes a love of playing with language and experience design that makes these kinds of projects particularly fun.

Additionally, this guide builds on the work Mel Compo, Nancy Tilton, and Tomis Parker did to create Starter Kit v2.0, as well as translation work done by groups in Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Brazil. In all iterations, the Starter Kit of course builds on the beta version composed at – and after – the "ALF Summer" gathering of 2016 at ALC Mosaic, as well as the continued practice and sharable content generously offered by facilitators and community caretakers across the network.

The editors of this version acknowledge with deep gratitude the rich and varied lineages we build on with this project. We offer thanks to the curious, playful, and collaborative. To the young people and their grown-ups who have refused to believe mass processing youth through coercive and alienating institutions is the best we have to offer each other and our shared futures. To those who have developed and practiced alternative approaches to nurturing growing people, whether out of necessity, aspiration, or both. To organizers and guides from complementary movements who inform our practices, particularly those focused on disability justice, emergent co-creation, abolition of punishment systems, and trans-national solidarity. We also offer gratitude to our local communities and those who support each of us personally – whether with proofreading and listening or with dinners and

cat-snuggle breaks – making it possible for us to write, rewrite, rewrite, and rewrite again as we have sought to make this offering the most useful version of what it can be in this moment.

Outline

> "We need much more than 'reform.' We need a paradigm shift in our concept of education. We must view the movement to transform our schools as just as vital to our twenty-first-century humanity as the civil rights movement was to our twentieth-century humanity. That is how we must approach our investment in the future. That is how we must demonstrate our love for young people and their creative capacities."
>
> Grace Lee Boggs, *The Next American Revolution*

We'll open with some definitions, basic information about the Agile Learning Centers model, and a section of scene-setting first steps called *So You Want to Start an ALC?* That section includes information about some of our tools and practices, as well as some information about finding collaborators and clarifying your vision.

Next comes *Lay Your Foundation: The Structures, the Space, and the Storytelling Seeds*. This section explores options for program and governance structures, legal structures used by some centers, and other first steps for making your project recognizable and legible to regulatory bodies, for those programs opting for formal organization. This section also includes information on facilitation, finances, and the kinds of work-flows that will be necessary for keeping your center operating, whether it's a formal or informal entity.

It's Alive! gets into culture creation and day-to-day operations of a center that's open and running. This section includes information about how individuals' deschooling processes will show up in your space, conflict navigation, schedules, and volunteers. It's followed by *Season Changes and Maintenance Work* with some information about the ongoing maintenance work that will persist beyond the "it's so new and shiny!" phase of your project. This section includes information about community-building, fundraising, and marketing. We close with Back to the *Beginning: Why an ALC?* which explores the benefits of being part of our global learning network. The content following that section – in the *Appendixes* – are shares from experienced facilitators from across the network, offering their experiences to inspire new folks and hopefully make the path easier for future communities. After all, one

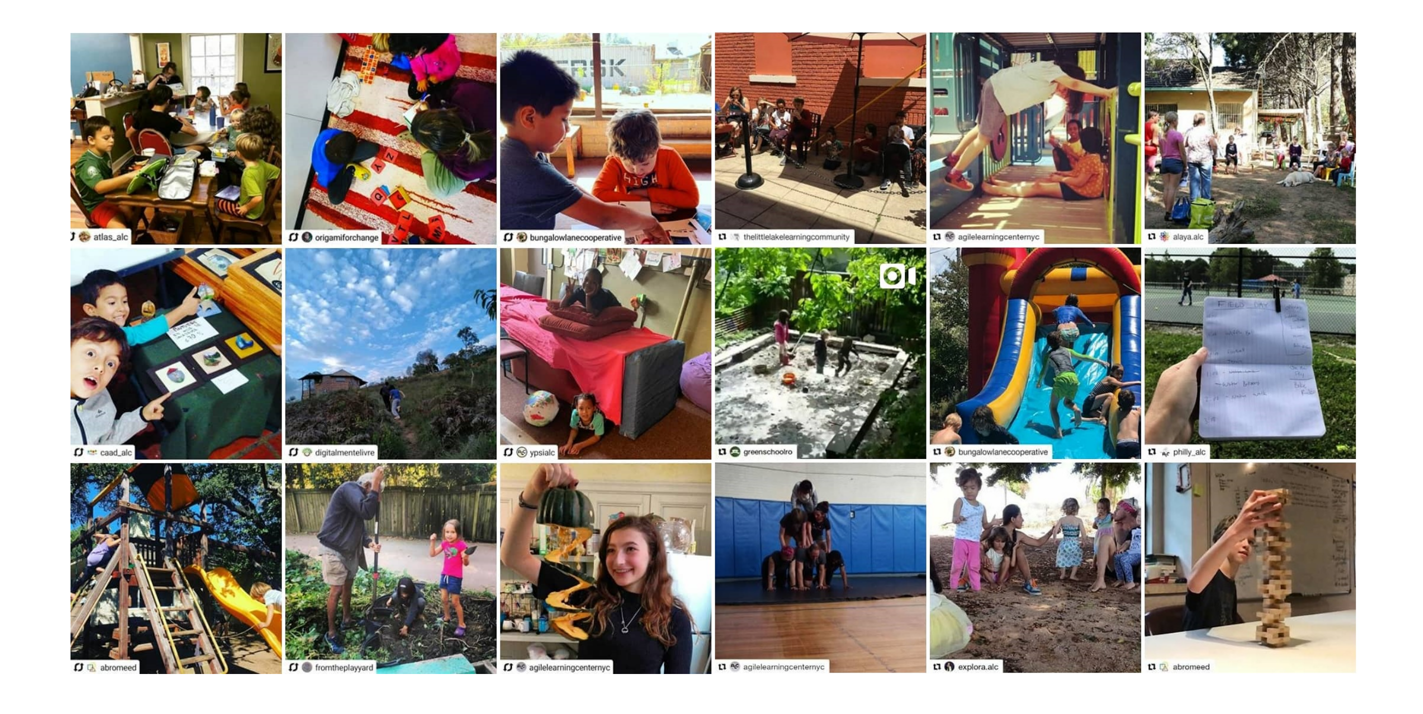
of our goals is to work together to make self-directed education communities available to young people (of all ages!) around the world.

A Meta Note

The institutional schooling that many of us experienced – whether directly or indirectly through the culture that normalizes it – is the reason we need to start documents like this with reminders, like that written knowledge isn't the only or most important knowledge. That thinking about theory isn't a substitute for embodied exploration and practice. That growing a learning community is not a solitary, standardized, or terminal goal. Rather, it's one where what you co-create will be shaped and reshaped by the context and relationships at play.

That schooling is why we feel a need to explicitly state that we're trusting you'll take what is useful and leave the rest. It's why we pause for a reminder that we all have the option to "listen" for all we can critique when someone offers their thoughts, but we also have the option to listen for what we can learn and what we can build on, as co-conspirators who share a goal. We can decide processing breaks and self-directed digressions are not just "allowed" but encouraged, that play and delight are not just tolerated but crucial, and that we don't have to be suffering for us or our work to be valid. We can recognize the ways schooling influences our relationships to knowledge, value, each other, and ourselves...and then we can choose another way.

You knew more collaborative, curious, and affirming ways once. Maybe you still do, but the reminders are necessary because the model of schooling institutionalized and exported around so much of the world deliberately trains us away from curiosity and collective learning. These reminders – whether we give them to each other or ourselves – are touchstones of a practice we'll refer to as deschooling. In deschooling, we excavate and replace limiting beliefs inculcated in us as kids, both so we can better avoid putting those beliefs on the next generation and so we can open space in ourselves to reclaim and nurture the self-directed learner we showed up on earth knowing how to be.



> "It can be inspiring and also disconcerting to witness our youth in action. They often ask for things that we were brain-washed into believing was 'too much to ask for.'"
>
> Ijeoma Oluo, *So You Want to Talk About Race?*

Some Basics

Defining For Ourselves

It can be helpful to clarify some definitions and frameworks before starting to improvise together. Here are some words we'll use a lot, and what we mean by them:

Education is the whole process by which one learns. This includes many kinds of experiencing, exploring, reflecting, integrating, applying, and changing.

> "This is our work, to discover what we can give. Isn't this the purpose of education, to learn the nature of your own gifts and how to use them for good in the world?"
>
> Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*

Self-Directed Education is a philosophy that advocates and practices an approach to education that, to complement Kimmerer's definition and quote the Alliance for Self-Directed Education, "derives from the self-chosen activities and life experiences of the learner, whether or not those activities were chosen deliberately for the purpose of education."

A *facilitator* is one whose presence opens space or creates ease, offering witness, non-judgement, non-attachment to outcomes, ease in not knowing, positive regard, safety, and generally conditions full of potential.

> "Facilitating is about creating a space for people to do something, while teaching is about passing knowledge directly,"
>
> adrienne maree brown, *Deem: Issue 1*

Agile is an adjective meaning flexible and adaptable...but also a 2001 innovation in software development that we share principles with. Key principles from the Agile Manifesto that we share include welcoming change, working together, emergence, iteration, and this gem: "Build projects around motivated individuals. Give them the environment and support they need, and trust them to get the job done."

An *Agile Learning Center* *(ALC)* is an agile, self-organizing learning community maintaining active membership to the ALC Network and operating in accordance with our philosophical

roots and principles.

The *Agile Learning Centers Network (ALC Network)* is a global network of member communities practicing liberatory self-directed education, and operating in alignment with our root values and community agreements.

The main *agreements* were and are to be respectful of people, mindful of their time, and intentional about how you engage. We are responsible for supporting each other, self-organizing to turn ideas into actions, and holding each other accountable. We practice facilitating from ALC roots/principles, committing to trust-building, caring without controlling, and contributing to a culture of generosity…generally working to show up in our relationships in ways that facilitate well-being and growth. We honor agreements set within our homebase ALCs and at the network level. Among us, we develop new agreements as we need to, through conversation and consensus. Read more of our Ecosystem Charter here.

The Agile Tree



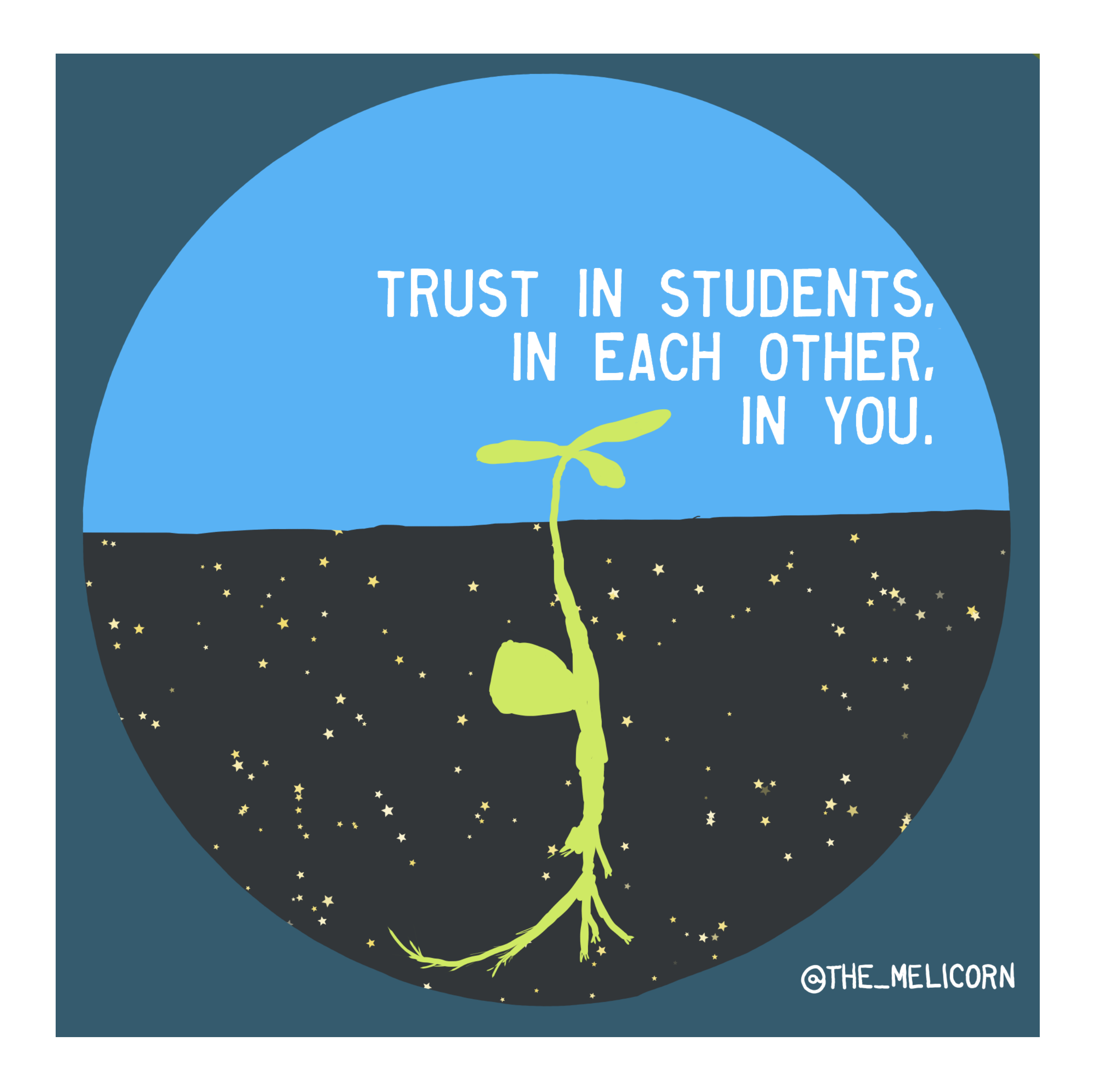
The Soil // Trust

We often use the metaphor of a tree to illustrate our educational model. Some parts, the "roots" and the "trunk," are essential ideas about learning which inform the practices of all successful ALCs, while others, the "leaves" and "fruit," are flexible and may vary between communities. All metaphors are imperfect, but one of the reasons we settled on and stuck with the tree is that it occurred to us in the early days that, just as a tree's roots can only hold it up thanks to immersion in something living and larger than themselves, the philosophical basis that forms the "roots" of our "tree" holds by touching a quality larger than itself. Our metaphor then, appropriately, starts with this relationship: we root our centers and our practices in trust.

The fundamental difference between ALCs and contemporary mass schooling environments comes down to the question of who we trust to decide what someone needs in their pursuit

of a fully lived and satisfying life. Other questions tumble out of this one easily – what is the purpose of education, whose lives and desires are valued in a given system (and whose aren't), how are we responsible to each other – but who we believe someone's days and dreams should belong to shapes our answers to these and all the other questions that follow.

Schooling at large involves adults – often following mandates from other adults, following mandates from other adults – sorting young people using biased assessments, imposing standardized and standardizing treatment on those in each track along with judgements about who is or isn't deemed worth investing energy in. These adults dictate when curiosity is to be performed and when it's "disruptive" or "distracting," make sure it's clear to all that working together is "cheating," and narrowly define intelligence and success in ways that limit young people's dreams unless they resist. Math is what the curriculum says only, and it belongs in the prescribed time, place, and manner. Reading, like dish-washing, is a necessary chore to be endured, and writing must always conform with the class rubric to be "good." Each test is the test, necessary and life-defining. After all, if we don't process complex people with intellects, bodies, hearts, and histories into algorithm-friendly sets of scores, how will we be able to tell them who they are and what kind of usefulness they should aspire to?



Even if some preserve their wholeness or even find ways to flourish within such an ableist, alienating, and oppression-reproducing system, we dream an alternative that is liberating for all kids and contributes to a more just world. Folks have been dreaming of and working to realize alternatives for as long as schooling has existed; we're new-er, and continuing a long-established tradition. There's a rich history of resistance to schools dehumanizing children and reinforcing social inequity. There's also a long history of communities outright rejecting the idea that education and childcare ought to be entrusted to institutions, particularly those organized by non-community members to serve their own agendas. Most contributors to this kit are located in the places where Black and Indigenous folks have spent hundreds of years finding ways to survive in spite of the efforts of such institutions. In these and other communities industrial institutions have historically offered mostly neglect and violence to, folks with their own expertise in collective care and knowledge sharing traditions have often understood mandated schools as places that expose their young people to harm. Many have and do continue self-organizing around community needs instead. Sometimes they call

youth and education projects “schools,” and sometimes they don’t, much like how some ALCs organize as “schools” and some don’t, based on what best serves community needs.

Agile Learning Centers share a lineage with these formal and informal community projects that trust kids, trust people, to discern for themselves who they are, what they need to learn, and which choices will contribute to their sense of having a meaningful life. We trust their self-determination and curiosity. We trust their varied ways of knowing are valid, and their interdisciplinary interests add richness to our shared worlds. We trust that offering supportive relationships and safe places for play and exploration serves young people better than spending their childhoods on coercion and test-training ever could.

The Roots // Foundations

In the soil of trust, the Agile Tree has four main roots that are the underlying assumptions of our educational model. These roots are the foundation all other aspects of an ALC follow from:



1.*Learning*: Learning is natural. It's happening all the time. Babies gather information, exploring and experimenting as their development and environments allow. Playing, imagining, noticing, imitating...it's all learning! Concerns about how to force people to learn something, as well as delusions that we can predict and dictate to them what content they'll need to learn for the future, don't actually serve learners. Accompaniment as they direct their attention, experiment with different study methods, and figure out who they are as a learner does.



2. *Self-Direction*: People learn best by making their own decisions, and children are people. Adults take for granted from experience that focusing on learning material is easier if we're feeling emotionally and psychologically safe, fed, rested, and consenting to the time and place of the study session. Maybe we know we personally study better with earplugs in, music on, a pomodoro timer, or in parallel with a friend. We definitely know we're more motivated when we're choosing the content or when we can clearly relate it to a goal we have for ourselves. Even though we can often manage some studying in disembodying and coercive environments – and we may sometimes opt into those environments to accomplish a specific goal – we can learn so much more when our self-direction is supported instead. Now imagine what would be possible if we didn't interrupt young people's self-direction and school them away from their educative impulses for their whole adolescence!



3. Experience: People learn more from their culture and environment than from the content they are taught. The medium is the message. Whatever we say, do we act like everyone in the room brings knowledge to contribute? Like a teen's questions matter more than how she's dressed? Like failure is part of learning, grades don't determine your value, "great books" come from all cultures, and "history" is a process we're actively part of right now? If there are lessons we want folks to understand from their time at our center – like that they're trustworthy, that there's richness in difference, and that consent matters – signs and slogans aren't enough. We have to align our practice with our values, aware of what lessons are being modeled and felt.



4. Success: Learning and personal growth are achieved through non-linear processes. Recognizing we iterate through cycles of intention, creation, reflection, and sharing, we can allow for time dreaming, reflecting, failing, and even resting to be as important to our process as time spent on activities conventional schools and bosses would recognize as productive. Within our ALC communities, we can set up daily practices as scaffolding to support clear intention-setting and ongoing reflection. We can have nuanced conversations about what success would involve and feel like for each of us as we pursue our various goals.

The sharing phase of the cycle is both one of the most ALC-specific aspects of these "roots" and one of the most frequently misunderstood. "Sharing" can look like making a blog post or social media video, documenting your reflections, conclusions, and accomplishments with a public artifact. "Sharing" can also be the moment when you teach what you learned, a practice that certainly reinforces your recall of the material and demands a deeper

understanding than is needed to pass a multiple choice test. These ways of sharing are valuable, but unless we've done some deschooling around who and what our learning is for, it's easy to fall into assuming the documentation or performance are the whole point, and that external approval and validation of them is success. Pausing to remember that learning is for the learner, for self-actualization and fully living a life that they find meaningful, clarifies that success is deeper and more personal than getting lots of followers on your YouTube channel (although it doesn't exclude that, if that's what you're into)! So what's important about sharing? While we aren't looking to others for judgement and gold stars, we also don't learn or live in isolation. Our communities help us grow. When we offer them our skills and insights as we learn, on top of deepening our learning we enrich the community, inspire others on their journeys, and contribute to creating a culture of generosity in which there are more resources available to everyone as everyone grows and shares. Making public posts and offerings is sharing, but so is volunteering in a meeting or following up with someone newly interested in that thing you do. It's not about the format; it's about the relationship.

The Trunk // Community

A tree's trunk, the bulk of it, does an astonishing number of jobs. It protects, stabilizes, stores, records, transports, bends, reaches, and more! Engaged community members at an ALC, like the tree trunk, embody the project in the present while holding lessons from the past and reaching for the future. Philosophy is great, but ultimately our projects are about people.

> "[Matthew] Lieberman challenges our fundamental understanding of human needs, putting social connection that supports interdependence before even food, water, and shelter. If we don't ask for or accept help because of the independence we feel we must have, we don't offer it because of the scarcity we feel...One of the things we most miss out on by not having deep community is the abundance of support, resources, and care that exists when you've got many hearts and hands circling you. We can create more of what we all need when we are in community."
>
> Mia Birdsong, *How We Show Up*

The Branches // Principles

The branches of the Agile Tree are the guiding principles we use to translate theory into practice and ideals into action. We want each program to be able to invent, adapt, assess, and reinvent our structures, tools, and practices to the needs of their unique community and setting. As you do so, we recommend using these principles as touchstones to help ensure your adaptations are in the spirit of the ALC educational model and haven't wandered back toward the habits of authoritarian schooling that shape so much of our world.

1. *Play Infinitely*: Play is one of the most powerful paths to growth. Infinite play is the mindset that games are for adapting, that part of the play is changing rules and boundaries to make space for all the players so that the game may continue and expand to incorporate new horizons.
2. *Be Agile*: Make tools and practices flexible, adaptable, and easy to change… or change back again. Too much change all at once can be disorienting – try gentle changes over multiple iterations to see what's working.
3. *Amplify Agency*: Ensure tools support personal choice and freedom, as well as responsibility for those choices. Everyone should have the opportunity to participate in designing and upgrading the structures which guide them.
4. *Create Intentional Culture*: We shape culture; culture shapes us. A powerful, positive culture is the strongest, most pervasive support structure a learning community can have. Develop collective mastery rather than restrictive rule-making. Remember, intentional culture building supports intentionality in other domains as well.
5. *Make Feedback Visible*: Make choices, patterns, and outcomes visible to participants so they can tune their future behavior accordingly. Make the implicit explicit and expand transparency. These practices empower and build trust among community members.
6. *Clarify, Simplify, and Connect*: Don't introduce unnecessary complexity. Combine many principles and intentions into a single tool or practice, instead of trying to maintain more of them.
7. *Support, Don't Interfere*: Remember that support is not direction – it does not mean making decisions for young people or intervening in and managing their processes. Support that takes up too much space becomes counterproductive.
8. *Respect Others' Time and Space*: Hold no unnecessary meetings. Keep all meetings tight, productive, and participatory. Honor commitments, as well as scheduled start and end times for happenings. Check-in before creating work for someone else. Be thoughtful about taking up shared space.
9. *Build Relationships*: Be real. Be accepting. Respect differences. Support self-expression, self-knowledge and self-acceptance: authentic relationship is the basis of communication, collaboration, and trust between students and staff.

10. *Embrace Full-spectrum Fluency*: Celebrate multiple kinds of intelligence, modes of expression, and learning styles. Nurture multiple literacies. A functional education needs to focus on more than just “book-learning” textual, numerical, analytical, or memorization skills. Social, relational, digital, creative, and problem-solving skill sets are essential; recognize and develop them as such.
11. *Share Value*: Be clear and generous as possible with what you’ve been learning. We have much to offer, as individuals and communities, to our future selves, community members, and folks in communities like ours around the world. Documentation shouldn’t get in the way and it’s definitely not cool to mandate folks put more of themselves on the internet than they’re excited about, but there are lots of options. Community blogs, shared photo folders, open mic and showcase nights, personal task tracking systems, voice memos, graffiti walls, newspapers, zines...Find what works for you and shine your light.
12. *Make Safer Spaces*: Provide an environment of physical, social, and emotional safety. Set and keep critical boundaries. Foster great freedom within an appropriate frame of safety and legality, so that kids’ energy can be freed up to focus on learning instead of protecting themselves. This will require ongoing learning and unlearning, particularly when we’re working against marginalizing and oppressive patterns in the default culture beyond our space. Reach out to other facilitators for resources, guidance, and partnership.

 **"21st Century Skills" at ALC-NYC** https://vimeo.com/374327921

 **ALC Network: Evolving Education** https://vimeo.com/376261958

So You Want To Start An ALC?

From Idea to Intention

> It originated in 4 moments. In one, I realized when I graduated from college and started working, that there was a very serious structural flaw in the current educational-social-labor system. This flaw was that the current educational system was causing people's inner flame to be extinguished. Another moment was when I was reading a book on happiness written by a Buddhist monk named Matthieu Ricard. In it he talked about very simple but powerful tools for navigating our emotions. In a moment of inspiration I said to myself – this is what they should be teaching in schools, not all the crap they teach –. The third was when I first saw Ken Robinson's video about school killing creativity. I ended up imagining what the ideal school would be for children, a place where they could play endlessly. I said to myself -someone should create this place-. I realized at that moment that I was following a pattern of dumping responsibility on others and I said to myself, "Why not me? Importantly, I had already seen in my lifetime that several things in today's society were not working and no leader or political party was going to be able to transform them. The only way to do it that I saw was to transform the current way of thinking, and this was beginning to develop in childhood. So it was already brewing in my mind from before, to create a space different from the schools. A space where a more conscious way of thinking could be generated and developed. The final moment was when I talked about these things with my friend Montse. She also shared with me her concerns, which resonated with mine. That's how we ventured to create this space.
>
> Sofía Borbolla, Mauna Kea ALC, San Luis Potosí, México.

> In early 2008, during the final semester of college, I read the book Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing after my best friend Aaron (Brown) Mahnaz told me about it. We both shared an interest in Erich Fromm who wrote the Foreword for the US edition. All my of searching and self-learning to discover what type of social change work I could invest my life in (in order to save it), seemed to have culminated in the experience of reading that book. I spent the next year devouring all the unschooling/democratic education/free schooling information I could as I worked as a teacher's assistant at a private Montessori school in Lexington, KY. Then I spent three years as a "Staff Member" for Manhattan Free School, working closely with Pat Werner, the founder and Director. We enjoyed each other's company and partnership. The school struggled to find its identity. It was a "Free School" that made decisions democratically, but the culture was infantile and

> student turnover was high. When I arrived, I had the fantasy that you could simply put 30 kids in a room, remove demands for their time and compulsory curriculum, and voila – it would be rainbows and unicorns. There were, of course, momentary flashes of rainbows and unicorns – of humanity's deep potential shining through an uncertain attempt to create a stable community of free people. Though, the experience rested on, and was punctuated by, a lack of clarity around the container that held the school. What was the intention for this school? What were its desires? Who really had power? What kind? With who and how did they share it? Were there boundaries? Was it a good fit for every young person that walked in the door? How would we determine that? What types of adults and adult behavior was needed and which types were toxic? Like any rich, new, and exploratory learning – I was left with more questions than answers. These questions paved the way for the work I would do in the future and guided me in my commitment to create healthy and sustainable self-directed communities.
>
> Tomis Parker, ALC Mosaic, formerly at the Agile Learning Center, NYC, US

> I got to school, and clearly the grown-ups had lied. Or maybe they believed themselves, but they hadn't told me the truth when they'd said school was a place to take the learning I'd been finding in the world and get to focus it, fine-tune it, deepen it with access to experts and resources beyond what I had at home and in the library. They'd said I'd find a place with all different kinds of kids being helped to learn all different kinds of things, and I was ready to start preparing for my world-changing career as an explorer-writer-entomologist-artist as I headed into kindergarten. I gave them another chance in first grade, "real school." By second grade, I was looking for how to stay occupied when my mind was too fast for the class, wondering why the adults spent so much time yelling, and studying the ways expectations of kids changed with our genders, skin colors, test scores, and even body shapes. It clearly wasn't right; this wasn't an environment that centered our learning and growing into ourselves. I did what I could and counted down the years. School wasn't the learning center I'd dreamed of, but even as I gave up on hoping it could be, I clung to the hope that such a place either existed or could be created. Adults around me talked constantly about learning from other people, project experiments, and even animals. The librarian never told me I was wasting my time on a topic or that my history and science readings needed to be kept separate. My sister that the school adults worried didn't test well could memorize entire films and build elaborate dioramas. Clearly the world was full of learning, so a place designed for expansion instead of sorting and standardizing couldn't be that difficult to create. The more of the world I encountered, the more sure of this I became. The path between the moment I decided we kids deserved better and my

> arrival at ALC-NYC in 2013 was non-linear and often full of uncertainty about how all the pieces would fit together. But here we are in 2021 with learning centers around the world that are all little-me dreamed of and more, centers that are rooted locally, linked into a global community, and creating futures full of possibility and vibrance and creativity and learning for all of us.
>
> Abby Oulton, Agile Learning Center NYC, New York, US

Find your people.

> “Everything worthwhile is done with others.”
>
> Moussa Kaba, quoted by his daughter Mariame through her works

Once you’re ready to commit and get started, you need to find your co-founder/s and build your starting team. After all, communities, collectives, and much of learning depends on relationships. And relationships are a great place to start looking for your team! Maybe you already have people in mind that you are excited to collaborate with and want to ask. Maybe you have educators, organizers, unschoolers, or liberation-minded youth workers in your circle already, and can ask them for partnership or for leads. You can ask family, friends, community members, and your own mentors if they have any ideas of folks to introduce you to. You can leave your info at your local library, makerspace, radical bookshop, or coffee shop. And then? Organizations like the ALC Network and the Alliance for Self-Directed Education may be able to connect you with folks in your area if you reach out using the contact forms on their websites. If you’re excited to socialize, you can start a self-directed education meet-up group or book club that meets at a local family space like a playground. If you’re excited to be online, homeschool forums, unschooling lists, and gentle parenting social media groups are all places you might find useful. Just be clear first about what you are and aren’t looking for; not all groups that advocate pulling kids out of conventional schools are motivated by dreams of liberation and self-actualization for all young people in a more just and equitable society.

Building a Founding Team

> Something very relevant for me and that I am sure has helped us to continue to exist as a project is to surround yourself with a team of people who feel the same concern as you and want to build something together with the same responsibility, I have heard a lot from

> founders of centers that it has been very difficult to do it alone, and I am not saying that as a team it is easy but you can distribute the work, co-create together, celebrate together and even cry together when you feel it is very complicated.
>
> Abigail Gonzales, Educambiando, Xalapa, México

> A very important energy drain is trying to convince other people. Recommendation: Do not waste energy on this. It is impossible to convince someone who is not ready to understand this. Those who are ready understand it very quickly. In our first meeting with interested families, our first filter was to detect if they were ready or not. When we detected that they were not, we did not invest so much energy in them. You have to make smart energy moves. An important process for the founders is to let go of control and distribute the energy of the co-creation of the space to all the members. It is difficult for one person alone to sustain a space like this. It must be constantly made visible to all members of this community (Parents, Team, Children, etc.) that the responsibility of making this work is everyone's. Distribute the needs of the space as much as possible. This also makes everyone feel part of it and that it is theirs. This was one of the learnings that fell a little late in the moms, they realized that they were the most appropriate to attract families, they realized that they were the most interested in this space to continue. I personally had already made peace with the situation of closing, I knew that if we closed it was because society was not prepared to sustain a space like this. And so it was…
>
> Sofía Borbolla, Mauna Kea ALC, San Luis Potosí, México

As you look, you'll probably notice it's very easy to find people (parents or otherwise) who want to talk about things, think about things, and tell you what you should do. Those people can be helpful as advisors, supporters, or part of your growing community of participants, so long as you are able to hear them while staying anchored in your purpose. There are and will continue to be many kinds of roles for many kinds of contributors as your project grows. However, your co-founders will carry the responsibility of starting and running the school with you. You need to be able to trust each other, share labor in ways that feel equitable, communicate clearly, and troubleshoot as a team, particularly through challenging and uncomfortable situations. You want to partner with people who have a clear personal commitment to children and education. You want people who will actively and consistently work with you, seek to keep growing themselves, and take initiative to help the group stay steady and effective. If you share a mission and core values, it'll be easier to work through disagreements about strategy when those arise. With shared commitment to collaboration, reciprocity, and finding ways to call forth leadership from everyone in different domains,

you'll be able to access richness and resilience beyond what any individual personality or rigid hierarchical structure can provide. You will confront many struggles together, as well as many celebrations, so it will pay in the long term to be particularly thoughtful as you build your founding team.

In the same way many of us were miseducated about learning and our capacity as learners, many of us were also taught ways of being in relationships where we seek dominance, avoid conflict, prioritize being understood over understanding, and generally engage in ways that leave us and our collaborators dissatisfied. Deschooling our relationships to each other, to listening, to conflict, and to different kinds of accommodations and labor is part of the ongoing work for any team striving to replace those extractive and alienating patterns with more sustainable ways of being. There's some more on this in the facilitation section of this guide and in resources we recommend on our website, but to keep this guide brief and actionable we'll just take a few pages here to share some tools and practices that your team may find helpful in supporting collaborative discernment and decision-making. We're putting discussion of tools and practices so early in the guide, not because they're immutable and vital, but because you've got some big decisions to make as you start! These are the same tools and practices that many ALCs use daily to continually co-create the central experience with young people. When folks are describing the philosophy and principles that make an ALC an ALC, using the metaphor of a tree, they'll often describe the components explored below as "the leaves and the fruit," underscoring the seasonality of usefulness of any given tool as a community changes and grows. They're intentionally adaptable; hack and adapt (and drop) them as you need! Being agile means tweaking tools and practices as your community needs - and having the wisdom to avoid reinventing the wheel every time things feel stagnant.

Yes, we're suggesting you work with each other similarly to how you'll work with the kids. Always, but especially at the start of things, you have to be what you intend to create. We use the tools we do with children because they work for groups of humans with a common orientation and a variety of needs. Your co-founder cohort will likely involve fewer 7-year-olds than our center schedule-setting meetings, but what you need to pick a color scheme for your website and what the kids need to pick which tag rules to play with today aren't actually very different.

In the same way we are advised to practice grounding and generous communication outside moments of activation and conflict so they'll be second nature in the moments we're overwhelmed and needing them, practicing making decisions effectively when you only have a handful of adults in a planning meeting will serve you well when you later need to make

decisions while crunched for time and energy while operating the school with dozens of kids added to the mix. It's a gift to your future self and your project to do what you can to establish healthy patterns from the start.

Useful Tools

This section is a sampling of the tools we've found to be useful in making the implicit explicit, adding expediency to the flow of our meetings, and clarifying communication within diverse groups.

As we've emphasized throughout this guide, these tools are here for you to use when they work and to modify, adapt, or drop entirely when they don't. It's been brought to our attention that many of these tools are easy to adapt for groups where people don't read with the same fluency, but that they depend too much on eyesight for some groups, who then come up with auditory or tactile alternatives that suit them better. Your group's needs will change as it grows and morphs, so while you won't want to chase novelty for its own sake and stress your anxious collaborators out unnecessarily, you will want to ready yourself to embrace ongoing experimentation and change. Periodically pause together to consider:

1. Why are you doing what you're doing? Is it working? Could it be simpler or better adapted to your needs?
2. Is your current process satisfying? If not, what would be? What aspect/s can you change to get closer to something both effective and satisfying?

The Gameshifting Board

The Gameshifting board is a tool that makes the implicit social rules of a meeting explicit, both at the onset and throughout. It's helpful and adaptable for many kinds of settings.

Gameshifting boards clarify expectations and structure of meetings.

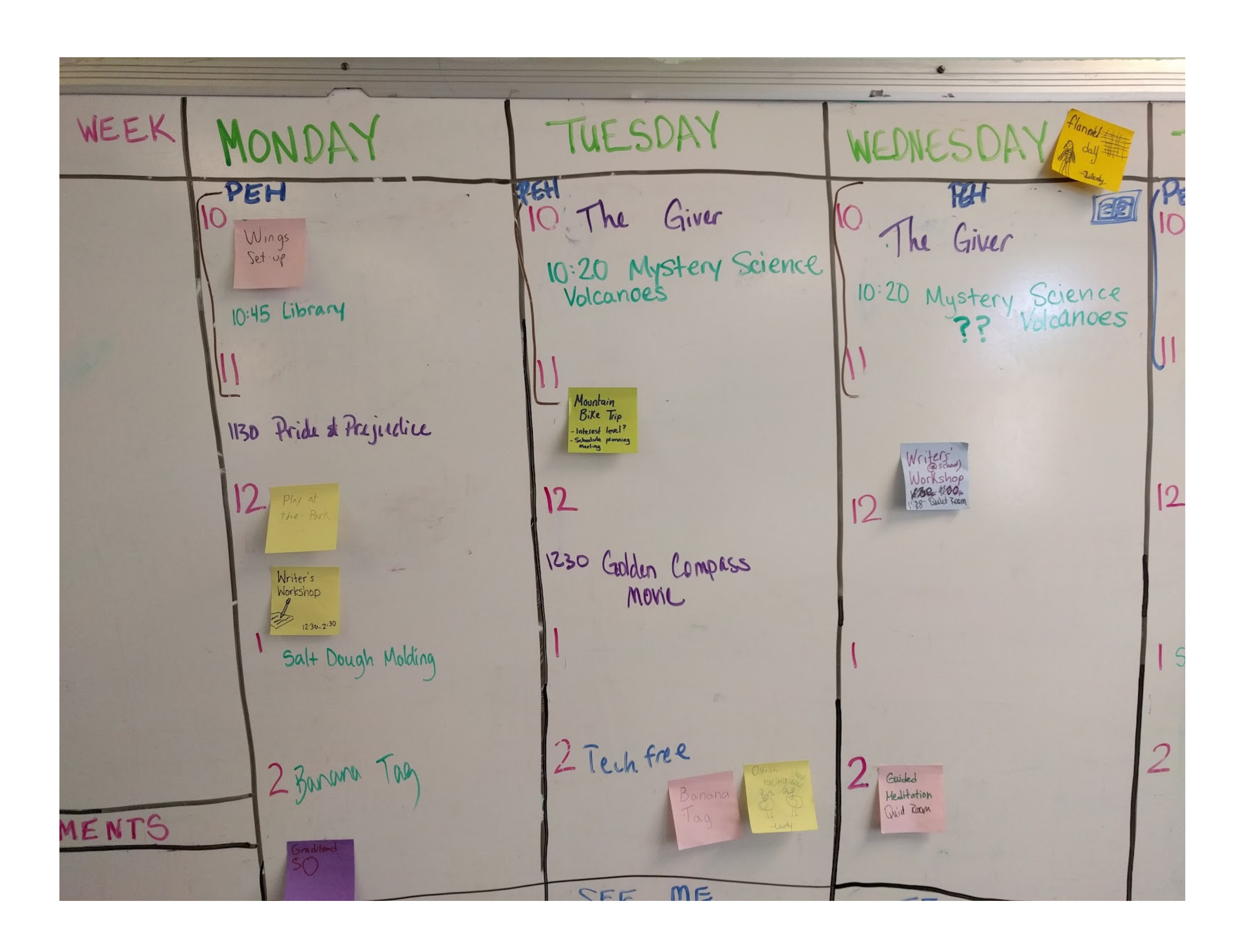
A simple whiteboard or other surface is divided into categories like Start Time, Finished When, Meeting Style, Roles, and Talking Pattern. Each of these categories will have several options that the Game Master (the role of the person who sets the Gameshifting board), group, or session facilitator may choose from, depending on the needs and aims of the people in the room. A marker is placed beside the convention in use, and if we decide to follow a different convention, we can move the marker. For example, maybe we start with our meeting set to be "finished when" all agenda items are completed. Should someone notice that we keep adding new items, have taken an especially long time with an early item, or are struggling to focus as we draw closer to lunchtime, they can bring the group's attention to this and propose a change. The group could then decide to move the "finished when" marker on the Gameshifting Board to "in 15 minutes, at alarm," or "after completing agenda items 1-5." Alternatively, the group could decide not to change their plan for when to finish, agreeing instead that all new agenda topics that emerge will be addressed in a future meeting and that the group will take a 5 minute bio break then resume with refreshed purpose and focus. With the patterns and expectations clear, the group is better set up to intentionally set and adjust them based on their needs.

In addition to supporting the group in mindfully shaping meeting dynamics, having norms and expectations for a session clearly set where they can be referred back to or quickly referenced if one comes into the meeting partway through can alleviate a lot of anxiety, especially for humans who struggle intuiting social cues. A board with open space for additions and alterations invites creativity, especially from young facilitators who may be more interested in experimentation than "getting through" an agenda as quickly as possible. Students learn how groups can rapidly change forms to accomplish different things, and can apply these skills to resolve conflicts and create and explore together.

Lastly, having the board reflecting their choices – and meeting dynamics are choices – back to the group can help them interrupt or avoid replicating patterns they've been trained to default into but that don't serve them. These are patterns like arranging deferentially around a lecturer or boss, problematizing ways of listening that involve doodling or don't involve eye contact, and allowing the same few voices to dominate the conversation while the same few people always end up with the carework of note-taking and clean-up. There are more, and they'll differ across contexts, but what's important here is that the group can only reject and replace them once they see what's happening. Being able to intentionally change the patterns helps groups practice together for the world they want to create. They can take many forms, meet many kinds of needs, and achieve many kinds of outcomes.

The Agenda

Having a plan posted and clear agreements about how to change it gives people the notice they need to prepare to engage. It can be supportive for those who thrive with steady structure, who need transition time, and those who may need reminders or inspiration at various points in their day. Often we build our agendas collaboratively, harvesting ideas from the group and then building ourselves a plan from those offerings. Sometimes when we have a designated facilitator and goal for a meeting, or when we have an element like delivery of a prepared meal or a guest speaker that's scheduled for a set time, the facilitator will offer the group a draft agenda, explain which pieces aren't movable, and invite edits rather than ask the group to build from scratch.



Heart to Heart
by Rita Dove

It's neither red
nor sweet.
It doesn't melt
or turn over,
break or harden,
so it can't feel
pain,
yearning,
regret.

It doesn't have
a tip to spin on,
it isn't even
shapely—
just a thick clutch
of muscle,
lopsided,
mute. Still,
I feel it inside
its cage sounding
a dull tattoo:
I want, I want—

	Green Room	RED ROOM	Makerspace	Library	Game Room	Office	Lunch Room	Offsite
10:00						D3D		Aero
10:30								
11:00								
11:30								
12:00					Project Arrhythmia			Kickball
12:30								
1:00		History						
1:30								PARK
2:00								
2:30								

Agendas can be very open one week and full the next!

Most likely in a meeting or small workshop setting, the agenda will be fairly straightforward. You'll want to list what's happening when, including details on location if there will be multiple sessions happening concurrently. Build in bio breaks for folks to stretch and wiggle. Build in transition time where materials will need to be distributed, cleaned up, or divided among groups about to head into breakouts.

In contexts where you're planning for more than a few hours, the agenda can easily be morphed into an Offerings Board or Weekly Schedule board. Offerings happening each day are listed in their respective time slot. You may use text, illustrations, or another method. Maybe you'll find it helpful to pick locations or also list who is hosting each offering along with the offering title. Centers that have recurring offerings often write those offerings into the schedule then use sticky notes or magnets to add more ephemeral offerings into the mix.

Offerings that require firm commitments, transportation, or purchases of a certain amount of materials are often listed on a board separate from the scheduling board. After Set the Week,

or the relevant agenda-setting meeting, interested parties can write down their names for these offerings so facilitators and offering hosts can better arrange their logistics.

Kanban

Kanban is Japanese for “card signal,” and a popular workflow management tool for tracking intentions, ideas, work in progress (WIP) and accomplishments. A basic Kanban is divided into columns which can be called anything, but for this example we’ll use Backlog, Ready, Doing, and Done. Tasks and project steps are noted on “cards,” which are often digital elements on a Trello board or are sticky notes on a physical board.

The “Backlog” holds cards with ideas and possibilities. At the start of things, whether that’s a day at the center or the opening of a meeting, items from the Backlog and from folks’ personal agendas get pulled into the “Ready” column as intentions we line up for ourselves. Though kids moving through games in a day often won’t stop to update their boards, moving cards from “Ready” into “Doing” and then “Done” columns, the option is there for those who find that satisfying. Moving each item’s card as you get to it is most helpful when moving a group through a session together or when team members are working asynchronously and need to track what tasks are in process and which ones are waiting to be tackled or complete. The Kanban offers a quick and easy breakdown of what is getting done and what is getting neglected.



Kanban tasks vary from "proofread report" to "eat lunch."

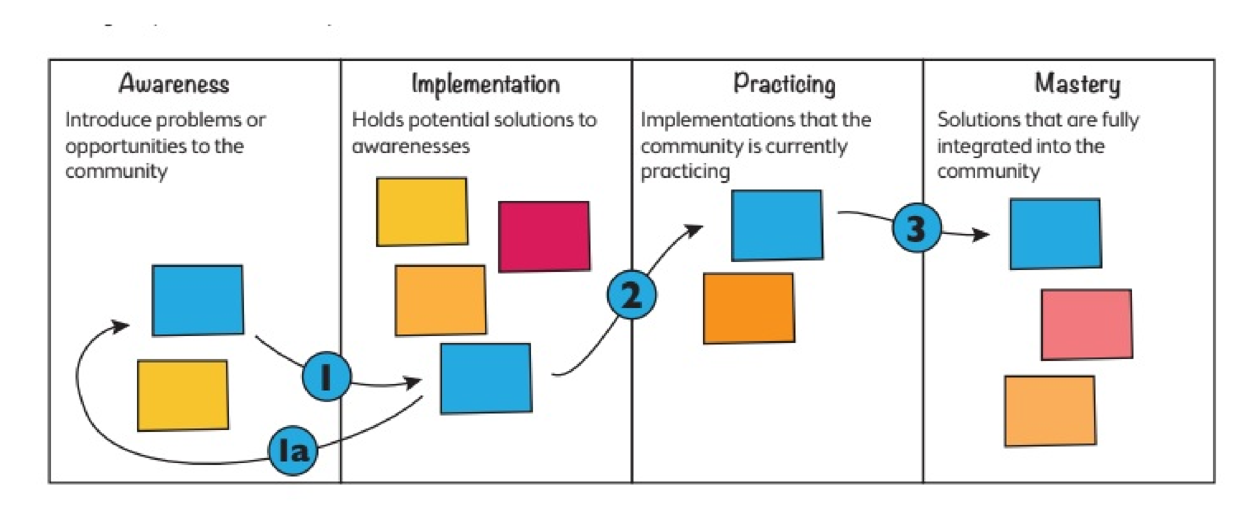
Two guidelines for Kanban use are "visualize (or clarify) your work" and "limit your works in progress." When we get specific about our work and wants, turning the abstract tangle of dreams and deadlines in our minds into clear, actionable, and bite-sized prompts in front of us, we can spend less energy worried about forgetting and feeling overwhelmed. Pathways become easier to recognize, and this tool, like many workflow tools, can help us to stay focused and to create accountability for ourselves.

If there are items that aren’t seeing any movement on your Kanban, there’s information waiting for you to investigate. What’s the block? It’s important we model and support kids in engaging such “failure” moments with curiosity rather than shame or judgement. If “practice piano for 20 minutes” or “call landlord about renewing lease” makes it onto the board as an intention but moves no farther, explore why. Is your daily agenda overly ambitious? Do you need to pick a time and set yourself an alarm so you don’t get distracted and forget? Are you avoiding the task, either because you no longer care about learning piano or you’re worried your phone call will run long and take the whole day? Once you’ve identified your block, you can set about experimenting with solutions.

Finally, having a “Done!” column sets you up for a satisfying review of all you’ve accomplished, which can be especially heartening if you do the kind of administrative work that takes all day and somehow leaves you with more to do than when you started. Items in the “Done” column can be pulled and organized into a transcript or activity report for a young person at the end of a semester. They can be a reference point for a kid who worries at the end of a day or week about having “done nothing.” (To be clear, we’re fans of taking time to do nothing but be and rest and notice. Sometimes this feeling is kids feeling frustrated about not having accomplished something they wanted to get to or echoing judgements they’ve taken on from their grown-ups about how they’re spending their time.) For groups using Kanbans for big projects or multi-day events, going through the “Done” column together can scaffold a group reflection and help folks prepare to depart feeling satisfied.

Community Mastery Board

A Community Mastery Board (CMB) is an adapted Kanban used to facilitate the creation of community agreements. ALCs have regular meetings – often called Change Up but sometimes called by other names – for reflecting on how things are going, updating or implementing agreements to facilitate folks getting their needs met as both individuals and community members as consistently as possible, problem solving together, and making sure our norms for interacting with each other and the space are fostering the kind of culture we’re excited to be co-creating (and spending lots of time swimming in!).



Shout out to Drew Hornbein for this graphic!

The board is divided into columns. Early boards started with a column for gathering “Awareness” notes on problems and challenges, announcements that impact the whole

community, requests for group consent to do something like bring a pet to visit, and sharing inspiration to introduce something new, like monthly dance parties. The boards also had a column for “Implementations,” or actions the group decided to test for a cycle in response to a specific Awareness. The next column, which sometimes included gradations, was “Practicing,” for Implementations we decided to keep after our initial test and continued to practice so they would become community norms. Finally, the “Mastery” column held established norms and agreements that had successfully been incorporated into the culture and addressed the initial awareness.



While these elements haven't gone anywhere, as different communities adapted the board and shared how their experiments changed their meetings, some of these adaptations started to spread. ALC Heartwood introduced a column for stating the value or need that makes a specific awareness important to the person bringing it up. ALC-NYC added an “Archive” column for 'awarenesses' that were really announcements. Some centers started including a “Focus” box in the “Practicing” column for when the group decided there was a need to...focus on a particular agreement. New communities can pick and choose which elements feel useful and which would add unnecessary complexity. Experiments are

encouraged...Part of what's interesting about the Community Mastery Board is it's a tool for making change that folks can use to keep changing it!

Instead of moving cards across the board as with a normal Kanban, Awareness cards that don't get archived or left in place as a group reminder for the next cycle are often left in place or attached to the related Implementation card so we can refer back as we test different responses to it. Sometimes the group will need to test multiple solutions to a problem. Every failure is feedback! And keeping notes handy from week to week or cycle to cycle will keep new iterations grounded while offering a more long-term view for pattern-hunting should you really get stuck.

Two things to keep in mind regarding Community Mastery Boards (CMBs):

- Limit your works in progress! Just like a personal workflow, a community workflow can only meaningfully incorporate a limited number of new things at once. Only test as many implementations in a cycle as the group can track, so the reflections on it will be useful and productive. Notice if your Practicing column is filling up without meaningful cultural changes or steps towards Mastery being taken. Slowing down, taking a few steps back, and releasing attachment in favor of trusting the process are all practices that will serve you well as you seek dynamic balance.
- Find a way to make sure "mastered" agreements are visible to visitors and new students. Everyone in your ALC may know that you only eat in the food room, because that practice made its way through your CMB months ago and has not come up since, but people entering your space for the first time won't have a clue. Make sure you give new folks the information they need to operate effectively in your community.

 Here are Change-Up Stories! Cutting-Edge-Agile(1).pdf - 1MB

Documentation

Notice that we're listing documentation as a tool and not a goal to organize your whole project around. This can be difficult to understand for adults who are concerned about metrics, measurability, quantifying learning, proving "impact" to external institutions, having something to wave at an unsupportive co parent or grandparent to convince them having agency and play isn't ruining their kid, or who themselves faintly remember learning cool things as a kid and wish they'd kept better notes. Sometimes it's just that they (we) haven't

deschooled from being taught to value the written above all else and ourselves only as scantron-friendly score-and-certification-assemblege “selves.” Knowledge is more. Learning is more. Life is more, and you are more.

Most times, when you feel the tug to interrupt a game or break your focus on listening so you can document, release that compulsion to turn the moment into a possible artifact and get back into the living of it. Kids are very good teachers for this. Documentation can be delightful and very, very useful! Just remember it’s a tool that should serve, facilitate even, exploring, reflecting on, iterating, and sharing about happenings at your center. Maximum support with minimum interference is the goal.

When is documentation important and helpful? Here are some examples:

- To record and seal agreements, especially around topics like payment plans, consent for staff to travel with youth off-site or for them to leave on their own during time you’re responsible for them, release of the project and staff from liability for things like hot glue gun burns in your space that’s kept hazard free but supports experimentation with tools and risky play. Paper, which you can make copies of and digitize later, is usually best for these situations. Digital signatures on webforms and PDFs are increasingly also accepted. Make sure to include a date and to consider if you want witnesses.

- To hold and make visible things we decide are important to remember, like our daily intentions, goals for the week, the login for the school wifi, when the movie room is booked, what to feed (and not to feed) the resident hamster, what the steps for cleaning the art room are, or to fill our water bottles before going to the park on a hot day. What works best as a reminder for one person may not work for another! On the walls in your space, you can set up Kanbans, posters, checklists, whiteboard notes, and labels. Digital Kanbans on the Trello app, phone alarms, online calendars, and other work management apps may work better for some folks, especially if they could benefit from a scheduled auditory reminder. Some people keep notebooks or checklists, which can’t be set to interrupt your lunch with a time check and appointment reminder, but work well for people who remember best what they physically write down. Whatever you use, it should work for you and you should keep it decluttered enough to stay useful.

- As record and reminder of what got discussed in a meeting, particularly if the meeting is part of a series tackling an ongoing question or project, if people who should be in the know about the conversation weren't able to be present, if a situation could lead to conflict or legal action where a papertrail documenting your handling of things responsibly and fairly could prove useful, or if you're discussing a topic like "goals for this year" that you'll want to circle back to through the coming months. For meeting minutes and keeping track of ongoing conversations or tasks, we mostly use shared Google Docs, have a notetaker keep minutes with a word processor and email the file out after the meeting, or use a shared Trello board formatted like a project Kanban. Where you're anticipating legal trouble, or just trying to stay ready so you don't have to scramble to get ready if things go sideways, again, paper, which you can make copies of and digitize later, is usually best for these situations. Digital signatures on webforms and PDFs are increasingly also accepted. Make sure to include a date and to consider if you want witnesses. Emails can also work; sometimes sending a follow up email or a summary to other staff after an in person or phone conversation is a useful move. Labeling and archiving emails is up front work that can save you a lot of time later. Generally you'll want to remember that your communication records can be subpoenaed. It'll be stressful if they are, but if you've kept them organized and written with this expectation in mind, future you will be spared worrying over finding the relevant files, whether important details are left ambiguous, or if the tone is harsher than you'd like.

- For portfolio-building, which has its own value as a reflective process but can also be important for young people applying for various programs, for families to have notes on what their kid is up to so they feel better about their choice of self-directed education and their tuition payments or program fees, and for your project as it broadcasts its story in the hopes more youth will get the chance to attend, governments will allow it to continue to exist, and funders will donate to your perpetually dwindling paint-replacement-fund. The smoothest and lightest way to approach portfolio-building is to use a tool like Trello or SeeSaw to set up an online place for each learner to document their activities, establish a ritual of updating the notes in the tool together at the end of each day, and then just download a .csv or folder of media files to arrange into a portfolio or transcript as needed. Physical folders, notebooks, or envelopes of sticky notes from the "Done" column of a personal Kanban can also work, but you'll want to reflect with older kids that translating the information from those formats into

something digital they can share with a potential internship will be more work than if they kept their records digitally. Taking time to record narrative reflections – as videos, voice recordings, blog posts, or longer-form essays – will also make a portfolio more interesting, both for the learner and for potential audiences. In some cases, staff may want to take time monthly or quarterly to write reflections on what they're seeing in a learner. Where therapists, social workers, and other professionals are working with the child and family, quarterly notes on the literacy, numeracy, physical, and social-emotional development of the young person may be helpful or even necessary as part of advocating for the learner to receive the services and support they need.

- To share and celebrate! Sometimes we reach a goal and forget how hard we had to work to get to that point, but recording the little tasks and milestones along the way gives us tracks to look back on so we can appreciate and celebrate how far we've come. Telling the story of our process or figuring out how to teach what we've learned requires further deepening our understanding and testing our comfort with the new material. Finally, sharing our learning, accomplishments, and processes can be inspiring and helpful for those around us, allowing us to have a broader positive impact on our community and the world than if we'd hoarded that knowledge by keeping it to ourselves. Many groups share verbally at the end of each day, as well as collectively through newsletters, showcases, and shared photographs. Zine making and posting illustrations or diagrams on the walls in our spaces can be celebratory or reflective sharing. Blogs, videos, audio recordings, and other more public shares are both increasingly popular and increasingly provoking conversations around privacy, the attention economy, surveillance capitalism, data use, algorithmic bias, and more. Some young people want lots of followers who comment on their cat videos; some would prefer not to be known or knowable on the internet. It's important the adults on site understand enough about the digital world to be able to accompany young people through this discernment process.


Jump-in
Mediate
Deep Breat
Popcorn
Custom
Lotus
Focused
Relaxed
Energetic
Gamemaster
- Observes group dynamic
- Sets guidelines for optimal meeting
- Adapts with group dynamic
Limo 4 Sale
Glider 4 Sale
Cancel
Save


cottonwoodkids



Many centers document by taking photos during the day!

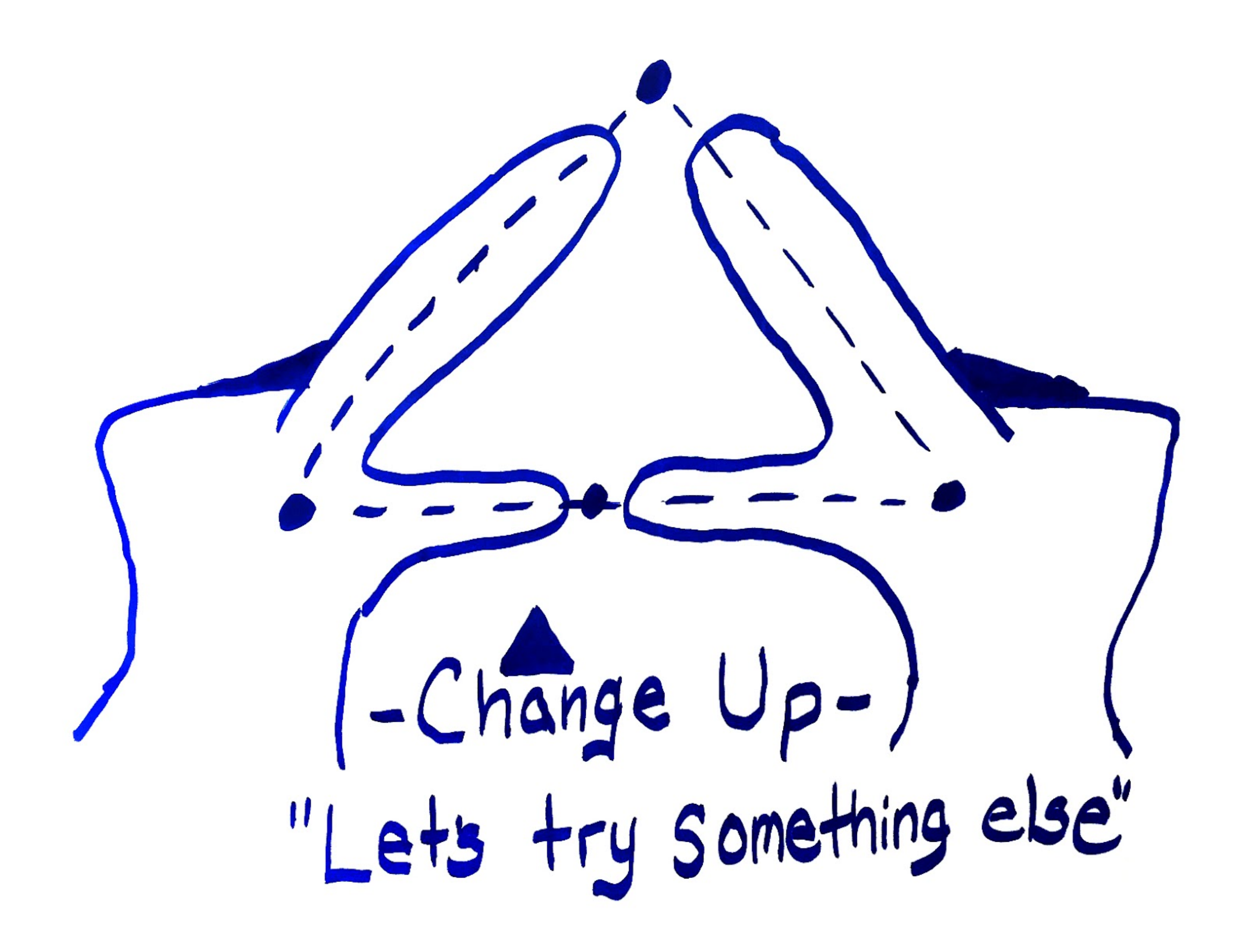
Hand Signals

In order to keep discussions productive and efficient, we employ hand-signals that serve as visual communication additions to the main conversation. When we speak one-on-one with each other, we rely on non-verbal communication cues that don't always translate well to a group setting. Hand signals supply the group with instant feedback without interrupting a speaker. Hand signals make non-verbal communication explicit and deliberate by replacing subtle cues with intentional, well-defined ones. They have a long history of use in activist spaces, and people may be eager to contribute signs they learn in other communities that they feel will fill a need (or be enjoyed).



drawing of a hand with wiggling fingers

One of our most commonly used hand signals is twinkle fingers, a wiggling of fingers that demonstrates strong resonance with what is being spoken. Many other movement spaces that use hand signals also use this one.



drawing of thumb and forefinger triangle (delta) sign

Also useful and widely used, though less used outside of ALC contexts, is the delta Change-up sign. When someone raises their hands with their fingers – usually thumbs and index fingers – forming a triangle, that's received as a call to pause the conversation and attend to the meta situation. Often it's a sign that group dynamics need to be shifted and the Gameshifting Board adjusted. Sometimes it's an awareness that the current process agreements are not being honored. A person can give this hand signal so others can have a chance to wrap up what they're saying, the group can pause to readjust, and then the queued up speakers – if there are any – can resume working through their turns.

There are a number of other hand-signals created for various needs: Focus Back, Trust the Group, Clarification Question, Slow-Down, Direct Response, etc. Be wary of falling into the conventional school pattern where there's a "Be Quiet" signal that just the adults use. Know also that older versions of this kit included an "okay" sign to indicate "we hear you // got it," but as a similar sign became popular with white supremacists in the US, centers have either changed that sign to something more obviously distinct or dropped it altogether. You should feel free to create new signals for shifting and signaling dynamics as needed in your

community. Draw them on your Gameshifting board, or another place where they'll be visible to working groups. We've found it can be fun to invite community artists to redraw the Hand Signals in various styles as their interests in different shows, styles, and videogame characters evolve.

Organizing for Results

Once you've got your vision, your co-founders, and a few ideas to start expanding your toolkit, you'll need to circle up and design governance structures that facilitate decision-making and ongoing adaptation to change, are responsive to your needs, and are aligned with your values. This is one of those moments when it's helpful to take a deep breath and remember (1) this is an invitation to practice trustful co-creation instead of ending up trying to guess folks' needs and carry too much alone, and (2) learning from and adapting from examples that exist means building on decades of hard-won wisdom, which is always preferable to trying to start from scratch. Many of us need to deschool from the idea that others are competition, that collaboration is cheating, and that the "genius" or overworked individual who creates something "totally new" all on their own is the mythic model we should aspire to. Those frames limit what we're capable of, cutting us off from allies, organizing lineages, and collective care. Reckoning with our interdependence and skilling up accordingly can feel overwhelming or even frightening – (she writes from mid-pandemic NYC having watched an apartment fire across the street spread to impact multiple buildings real quickly) – but for the community you create to be resilient and adaptable enough to navigate all the weather that will come your way, to really achieve long-term sustainability, it's work you'll need to do sooner or later.

So what will governance look like for your center? Governance of day-to-day operations within the ALC should, to be an ALC, involve iterative, consent-based, and distributed decision-making that's led by the youth as much as possible (assuming your center is a youth-centered space). The change-up process, including use of the Community Mastery Board and shared agreements, coupled with a thoughtful conflict resolution process (more on that later) should meet most of your needs there. In many centers, taking the same approach with families, staff, and other community members to address more organizational topics works well. Some communities keep governance as light and informal as possible, with fluid working groups arising as necessary and set times for checking in with everyone a few times a year. Other communities have more elaborate systems informed by their interest in sociocracy, spokes councils, or adhering to legal parameters that let them exist as a nonprofit or cooperative. You'll want to do some research and ask around before

deciding what's right for you, and you'll need to revisit this question as your team of collaborators and stakeholders expands.

But at this phase, while it's useful to start thinking about what models will feel supportive when you have six staff and fifty families to consider, all you really need is to get clear on how your team of co-founders will operate. How will you communicate, share files, and track progress on different necessary tasks that arise? What agreements do you need to keep that work and your collaboration feeling safe and satisfying as well as productive? Do folks have expertise and energy that would make them suited for specific roles, like ensuring the website gets built or that your legal and financial paperwork is in order? Expect that sometimes this process will be mind-blowingly gorgeous and sometimes it will be grueling, like living an engaged life always is. How will you make sure you regularly check-in on folks' expectations and concerns, so you're proactively addressing potential conflicts rather than letting frustration and resentment build? (Getting familiar with the Gottman Institute's resources on the "4 Horsemen of the Relationship Apocalypse" and "Relationship Green Flags" resources can be very helpful here.) Similarly, how will you make sure you regularly take time to touch back into your shared sense of purpose, to celebrate accomplishments, and to acknowledge folks for all they do to make your community what it's becoming? The more you can build care and a felt commitment to move through challenges together into your foundations, the more practiced you'll be later in situations where the community is dependent on folks having those skills. Share, listen, take notes, and be ready to iterate. You've got this!

There is much to be learned from the models and reflections of folks in self-organized learning projects, from the Zapatistas to Alchoholics Anonymous to Enspiral and beyond. *Emergent Strategy* by adrienne maree brown and *How We Show Up* by Mia Birdsong are popular among ALC folks taking on community organizing and foundation work. Online, reading work like *Design Justice* by Sasha Costanza-Chock and Francesca Pick's reflections on governance can be helpful as well.

Dig where you are.

Orienting

Even in the world of self-directed education, folks starting projects often hope we will be able to give them a universal template, something prescriptive like franchises and charter school chains use. Even without a template, sometimes having been schooled into disembodied

thinking, dislocated building, and disconnected creating (otherwise it's "cheating") sets us looking in all the wrong places for the guidance and resources we need. If we catch ourselves in these patterns, our deschooling practice might look like taking a pause to orient ourselves. You aren't just thoughts; you're a body-mind with experience, power, wisdom, and limitations. You and your work exist in a specific context, where your human neighbors, non-human neighbors, and the land itself are all independent entities you are in relationship with and whose relationships to your project will shape its future. The neighbors and team members who join your project aren't just props or patrons; they're your partners in this endeavor and you hold the keys to each others' potential. Remembered, rooted, and reconnected, now you're better positioned to choose your next steps.

Your situation is unique and significant. Other ALCs can share foundational principles and ideas for you to work with, but you and those around you know best the needs and opportunities of your situation. Maybe you're a single parent with 2 young kids, you have access to a building for free, you live near a beach but will need access to car/s for field trips, there's a popular homeschool co-op in your neighborhood already, homeschooling isn't legal where you currently live, etc. Other facilitators can offer their experiences, but you and your folks know best what's movable and what isn't for you. Consider your context. What's awesome and helpful, what challenges do you foresee, and how does your reality guide the design of your ALC?

Base Building

Beyond a reliable Founding Team, you will also need to start building a supportive community of parents, partners, advisors and other types of volunteers. You aren't trying to sell or convince anyone and make more work for your future self; you're trying to broadcast in ways that catch the attention of folks aligned with your mission. Once you have their attention, you need to make a compelling case for them to come alongside you and give them easy ways to get involved. This work is called "base building" in social movement circles, and it's work you both won't stop once you start and that you can always return to if you're not sure what to do next.

Don't limit yourself to educators and parents. Anyone who was once a child, has a relationship with learning, or is committed to a more equitable future could easily enough find reasons to care about and support your project. Humans have many kinds of wealth and resources we can offer each other once we decide who we offer our talents and solidarity to. If you can find people who support your vision and can offer legal, financial, or organizational expertise, their insights and feedback can enrich your strategy and planning

process immensely. If you are building community with any outspoken, passionate kids who are excited to speak in groups or at events about their experience as self-directed learners and how they intend to cocreate your ALC, welcome their powerful and inspiring sharing. If you are working with – or are! – parents who can speak to similar topics, welcome that sharing and its potential for establishing credibility with prospective parents and neighboring community members. Can someone illustrate flyers? Speak with a depth of understanding about the history of education in your region? Cook nourishing dinners that folks look forward to and connect over? Ensure the design of your space is welcoming for learners with a variety of bodies, minds, expressions, and needs? Take photos that become celebratory documentation for learners and inspiring reminders to the deschooling that learning can be delightful? Consider the gifts you have among you, and look for ways to set everyone up to contribute in ways that draw on their strengths and bring them satisfaction.

Noticing where your practical needs are beyond your current team's abilities – something it's helpful to be honest with each other and yourselves about as quickly as possible – will help guide you as you move forward. Maybe you'll seek out new collaborators, set aside resources to help an existing team member skill up to meet the need, or reach out to a contractor or potential partner organization. Maybe you'll do something completely different, and if it works well you can tell us to include it in the next version of this guide!

If you've gathered more than a handful of people who are willing to be active participants in meetings and do some work, then it's time to map out a plan and organize some workgroups. Be aware that people love to talk, theorize, and offer opinions about how things should be done. Those opinions don't actually accomplish the work of opening a learning center. At some point, you may need to reflect the group to itself and prompt a move from ideas to action. Making clear requests, setting deadlines, picking accountability buddies, defining what completion of a task or success at an endeavor would look like, trusting folks enough to say "okay" to as many of their ideas and proposals for their own contributions as possible, directly asking for what you need, and giving people space to surprise you and show up in new ways (yourself included) will help your groups stay productive and satisfying.

Ideally, these workgroups can also function independently as small collaborative teams between meetings supporting each other in the work that they need to accomplish between meetings. If your fundraising workgroup, website copy workgroup, and admissions outreach workgroup can work independently, meeting to get aligned then going off to get things done and checking in or posting updates on an "as needed" basis until your next major checkpoint, you'll get far more done faster than if everyone's time is being spent on meetings

and waiting around for someone else's permission. We're agile with young people; let's be agile with each other.

Remember that whenever you're creating something NEW, people don't have their lives organized to work on that thing yet, so don't be surprised or discouraged if it initially takes a lot of follow-up and reminders for people to get things done. Remind people that the workings of the workgroups and large group meetings are establishing the patterns that will shape and be reflected by workings of the center. What we create echoes how we are...so their choices have a lot of power, especially at the start of things! Support them in keeping promises, collaborating effectively, empowering each other, and building a healthy culture now, to make all your efforts more effective and pleasant later. Aside from helping set up and grow your center, your team will also be one of your main channels for reaching more people in the wider community and spreading the word about your project. Empower them and engage them, so their sense of ownership of the project increases and their authentic connection to it deepens. This will both make them more excited to talk to others about the project and will set them up to communicate with...well...ownership and authentic connection. And the base building continues.

As a quick aside, sometimes it comes up that democratic schools historically have put youth more in charge of nuts and bolts aspects of keeping their self-directed education spaces running than we're advocating here. Is this a subtle way for us to protect adult dominance while pretending to support young people's liberation and autonomy? Definitely not...If there are kids in an ALC who are really interested in the details of tax filings and managing utility bills, the adults are responsible for getting those necessary tasks completed but the youth are welcome to be involved. We don't mean to say youth can't handle conversations about building codes and laying off staff so should be kept out of those conversations. It's just that if organization administration isn't the skillset they're working on building, it's not "empowering" kids to insist they sit through drudgery related to that topic. There will also be some conversations that either involve other folks' personal situations or themes specific folks' histories and mental health require they avoid as much as possible outside theraputic settings. Sometimes the tasks that are necessary parts of keeping a center open are too full of bureaucratic busywork to waste kids' time with or too emotionally fraught to subject them to. In such cases, caring looks like thoughtfulness around expectations and then setting and holding necessary boundaries.

Beyond finding your people, there's the work of keeping them. Of course, sometime it'll be right for an individual or an organization to decide the time has come to move on; designing your organization with the assumption that folks won't be there forever helps ensure that no

one person becomes so idolized they can't be challenged or so central that the continuity of the project rest on their devotion and good health. Common as that pattern is, it's a really risky one long term! But because so many of us are schooled into that pattern and other dynamics of dominance, mistrust, insecurity, and extraction, we have to deliberately choose to do something different and then learn how to do it. For many people, the early stages of establishing their ALCs involve a lot of personal deschooling and learning among the adults as they practice asking for and receiving help, modeling generosity, making decisions as a group, navigating uncertainty, staying curious through conflicts, and regularly pausing to express gratitude. Since how we engage at one level of organizing shapes what follows at other levels, and what we practice in the easy times informs how we'll react when things get sticky, building these habits even before you have an idea of when you'll welcome the first cohort of kids into your project plants seeds that will later support you setting healthy collaborative relationships as the norm. There's more to come in this guide on collaboration and the practice of community, but it bears mentioning here because specifically appreciating and thanking folks for their contributions goes a long way in terms of establishing a culture where folks feel recognized and valued as community members. And that feeling of belonging and empowerment is as powerful for adult contributors as it is for young people looking for a safe place to come into themselves.

Lay Your Foundation

Structure

Program Structure

ALCs take many different forms, and it's common for them to experiment with and even change forms over time as their community members' needs and abilities evolve. If you've gotten clear on your mission and vision, you already have clues that should help you pick your structure. There are pros and cons to every option, and facilitators often find that developing a friendly partnership with a local project that's differently structured benefits both projects as they share resources, trade insights, and occasionally refer families to each other as a trusted self-directed education center that, for whatever reason, may be a better fit. In New York City, for example, where legal requirements differ for homeschoolers and students enrolled in official schools, it can be a huge relief for the school ALC to be able to refer a family they can't serve to the homeschoolers' center. Similarly, the homeschoolers' center refers families who want a more full-time schedule and official paperwork to the school. Both kinds of programs recommend aligned summer camps and afternoon programs or subject teachers, and so together make self-directed education available to more families than any one style of program could do on its own.

Agile Learning Centers organized parallel to conventional schools have fewer decisions to make regarding legal structure and operation, since local law will dictate many of their parameters to them. They'll also have fewer decisions to make regarding membership and participation than others, since they'll enroll students to a cohort that meets regularly – typically with attendance and record-keeping expectations from the state – and follows an annual "school year" cycle. Students will come and go through the course of a year, but membership will be fairly closed, steady through the course of the year, and usually dependent on pay and paperwork as well as adherence to agreements. Such projects need to organize their paperwork and set clear processes for joining, orientation, record keeping, check-ins, and leaving, but founders can get right to those conversations.

Some ALCs are organized more as resource hubs and community centers. Founders of these projects have much more flexibility, and many more decisions to make. Is the program formal or informal? Member-run or someone's business? Who will it serve? What will it offer? Will the center be open to the public, to those who meet membership qualifications and responsibilities, or to those enrolled in a cohort or specific program? Can folks drop-in or

drop-off kids according to their weekly schedules, or do you need them to commit to, for example, the Monday-Wednesday group or the Tuesday-Friday group? What are the days and hours of operation? Will you close for holidays or change schedules with the seasons? There are so many options! You can always iterate and adjust, changing as you see who actually shows up when and just how dynamic your pool of participants is, but having an idea of the audience and offerings you're focused on will be very helpful as you design your website, space, and welcome resources. Spending some time articulating what you're excited to offer and what your boundaries are proactively will also help you design against burning out yourself and center staff trying to meet everyone's needs.

No matter how accommodating, generous, and clear your plans are, there will always be folks who will tell you they need an hour more in the morning, a few hours more in the evening, a weekend day, a teens-only day, or childcare over a break. People's needs are varied and valid and sometimes contradictory. Hear them with compassion, and also remember you cannot be responsible for all of everyone's needs. What you can do, for the long-term benefit of everyone involved, is stay clear about what you provide and make sure you're able to do that well before considering adding complexity. You can always encourage – and maybe even support – community members' self-organizing and coordinating with each other to get their other needs met. If the ask is for something you'd love to do but lack the budget or staff for, communicating that with details of what specifically you'd need to meet the request may inspire new fundraising or recruitment efforts.

Insert samples of space schedules contracts

Sometimes start-up groups in this phase realize they want to prioritize, for example, a significant part of their budget going to instruments, music production equipment, and staff with music-related skills, and they ask if this is "okay." Having a focus in the kinds of supplies and expertise you offer access to – like being particularly set up to support folks interested in mountaineering or making robots – doesn't contradict with being an ALC so long as there's plenty of space for kids to *not* do those things, without receiving pressure or judgement, and to shift the focus if it stops aligning with the needs and interests of the learners. Similarly, applied-learning projects are exciting and popular among at least some kids at many ALCs, but a "project-based learning" center can't be an ALC because – however self-directed the learning that comes from working on a project may be – mandating that kids focus on regularly producing things for adults to assess isn't aligned with self-directed education as a philosophy. In a self-directed education space, some kids will be excited to show off completed projects or to use an available piano every chance they get, but others'

learning will include more reading, drawing, giggling with friends, or watching nature change out the window. They're all learning, in their own ways and times, not for the sake of adults' egos and approval, but rather to discover who they are becoming and how to each create fulfilling lives for themselves in this world. In an ALC, beyond organizing in alignment with self-directed education as a philosophy, there's also a commitment to offering accompaniment, care, and a meaningful role as co-designer and steward of the center alongside peers and staff. Our learning ecosystems need diversity, and there are many spaces in the broader movement for education change that could potentially use ALC tools, support self-directed learners, or be an incredible partner in collaboration with other neighborhood organizations...they just wouldn't be ALCs.

Operating Structure

> The functioning of Educambiando has transformed from our own exploration of what human intelligence proposes, where we form councils or committees that have no hierarchy of power but a specific function, putting in front and as the axis of the organization what matters most to us, which in our case are the children, as well as their families.
>
> At first, this configuration was made up of councils that take care of and support what we are most interested in taking care of, these councils are still: vision council; it is made up of the founding members of the project and its task is to support the coherence of the model as well as to create the proposals regarding the direction that the project requires to share it with the other councils and thus listen to the points of view to find resonance and put the proposals into practice.
>
> Administrative Council:
>
> for now made up of the same members of the vision council (looking for ways to allow other people to get involved to take on the roles and responsibilities required by this council) is in charge of finances, keeping track of family contributions and other activities that help finance the project, as well as making the payments required to cover all the needs of the project.
>
> Council of Facilitators:
>
> Formed by all the people who share time, space, accompaniment, as well as the knowledge and skills that each one has with the rest of the community; it has the

> responsibility to sustain the coherence of the model by sharing with people, to see emerging windows of opportunity and create proposals for them, as well as to create proposals that help meet the needs for the development of people's learning.
>
> Web and social networks council;
>
> it is made up of a team that is responsible for keeping the internal and external digital media updated, supporting the creation of courses and virtual training, creating content for the website and other networks and generating proposals for dissemination of what we do at the center.
>
> After the pandemic, we realized how important it is for us to have a sense of community to make this project resilient and sustainable, so we incorporated into our practices the integration of families in decision-making that has a direct impact on the operation of the center and the work we do with their children, such as the acquisition of equipment, process improvements, transportation strategies, health and safety protocols, as well as the sharing of knowledge from them.
>
> Currently, a family council has been formed, which is self-managed by the families themselves, with the purpose of creating close ties that support the process of unschooling each family nucleus, as well as issues related to the necessary practices outside the center in order to find coherence between what happens at the center and at home.
>
> This council and its functioning gives us the option to see ourselves more than as a learning center, as a self-directed learning community that has a center that works with the tools of the Agile model and other tools that help sustain the community and support self-directed learning.
>
> Abigail Gonzales and Edgar Gainko Ruiz, Educambiando, Xalapa, México

Below are some common operating structures for Agile Learning Centers, along with considerations specific to each. These aren't all the structures that exist or are possible, and they may not all be legal and viable in your context. Getting familiar with your local laws and organizational landscape will be important as you make your choice.

There are a number of online resources which can help you sort out your local homeschooler requirements and limitations, including for laws that vary state-by-state in the

US. Your local Department of Education or equivalent entity will have information about requirements independent schools must meet. Your Chamber of Commerce or other business organizations should have information about being registered as for-profit or not-for-profit and your incorporation options within each of those categories. In places where the laws around education spaces are unclear, some families and programs have had success directing governments to homeschooling laws of other places or working with organizations that offer accreditation for International Schools. Hopefully the next starter kit will have more information about these paths, but those experiments are still too new for us to say more than that they're happening (and we're hopeful.)

Learning Collectives:

Sometimes a group of families – or even a group of young people – will decide they want to work together to create an ALC experience for themselves. Operating collectively means they share responsibility and decision-making power as equals, managing the project together without anyone managing the others. The collective exists for the benefit of its members, and it can be as light as 3 families making an informal agreement to be each others' community and childcare...or it can get more formal and complicated. Unschoolers, world-schoolers, and self-organizing learners of all ages who find themselves craving intentional community may find this simplest of structures appealing.

Learning Coops:

> We are an ALC Community configured from the beginning in this way.
>
> We firmly believe that Self-Directed Learning is a way of life, which is not separated from an educational center and the home.
>
> It is precisely at home and we are the parents who facilitate the processes of the children, with love, respect, freedom, etc. creating appropriate environments that allow them to make internal connections and thus acquire all the learning that each one requires.
>
> We are a community of children, parents and facilitators in which we all learn constantly, grow, make mistakes and continue. We make decisions as a community and move forward together. We use the tools of Agile Learning to be more dynamic, effective in meetings, to make decisions and to organize ourselves.

> There is no family that leads and makes decisions. We are democratic and make decisions knowing that we can always change, test and move forward.
>
> Each family contributes based on what it has and can give, not only in economic terms, but also in skills and knowledge, always looking for the common good.
>
> Fernanda Buenaño, El Panal, Quito, Ecuador

Where a group wants to run an ALC project that they co-own and participate in, designed so others can participate in and benefit from it without necessarily becoming co-owners or sharing organizational decision-making power, they may want to form a cooperative. This structure is popular with unschooling families and facilitators who want to organize together then open up their programming to other families. For more on the legal and governance structure of cooperatives, look for local examples or check out online resources like this one. It's possible to structure yourselves as both a cooperative and a resource center, or in some places even as both a cooperative and an independent school. If that sounds appealing, you'll just need to make sure your legal and governance structures meet the requirements of both.

Resource and Community Centers:

Maybe the ALC you're imagining is a location with a stable staff and fluid, dynamic participation. It could look and function like a library, open makerspace, garden, or incubator and event space. It could be formal or informal, full-time or part-time, a corporation or a not-for-profit. Maybe it's a youth-run art space. Maybe it's an open yard and recording studio you maintain and provide mentorship at. There are many, many options. What do you have to offer, and what do the young people in your area say they need?

Independent Schools:

Officially becoming a school can mean the ability to offer more full-time programming, grant diplomas, be viewed with more legitimacy during custody disputes, exemption from testing requirements put on homeschoolers, and access to school-only programs or funding. It can also mean disqualification from some grants and needing to carefully learn to navigate government requirements around curriculum, health and safety. Some places have very few requirements or oversight for independent schools; some places are more restrictive and will ultimately lead to you needing at least one staff member – or better yet a working group – available and skilled enough to handle ongoing reports, audits, and compliance

management. If you're in one of those places, here are some major categories to watch out for:

Health

We'll discuss health-related requirements for your physical space when we get to discussing physical spaces, but expect those to be a consideration. You'll likely need inspections and plans to protect against lead poisoning, asbestos exposure, or kids breathing in harmful molds. Again, even if you aren't required to consider the air quality before setting up under a freeway or across the street from a concrete plant, you may want to pause to do so anyway.

Many places have vaccination requirements for youth enrolled at schools. You will likely be required to collect immunization records for all your students. You may be required to deny enrollment based on incomplete immunization records or to submit reports to your local Department of Health on an ongoing basis. We recommend that collecting immunization information be integrated into your admissions process and then additionally into your annual collection of updated enrollment contracts and emergency medical information.

You may be required to ensure you're providing specific health and hygiene education on a regular basis. Since children are naturally curious about their and others' bodies, your challenges here will be less about their interest than about learned shame, parental hangups around comprehensive and scientifically accurate sex education, and staff whose own sex ed. was likely inaccurate or incomplete needing to prepare themselves to pass on better information, so students will grow up better able to be safe and with healthier relationships to their bodies than many of us were schooled into. You may also be required to provide menstrual products or safer sex supplies. It's a good idea to do so even if you aren't required to, but a state requirement will mean you can likely get reimbursements or free shipments of materials by sending the correct forms to the correct office...which is worth looking into.

There may be requirements that all your staff or a certain percentage of your staff on-site have updated first aid training and certifications, including on topics like how you're required to store and administer (or not) medications. It's common for there also to be requirements that all adults interacting with minors agree to a background check and do some training on recognizing and reporting potential signs of child abuse, maybe just initially or maybe annually through a state program. If your staff aren't coming in with a child development background, it can be a good idea for them to learn some basics about general development and about trauma in families. While the state often isn't the best source for such training, those that have abuse prevention and "mandated reporter" trainings available online often

have free supplementary material on these related topics available on the same website. It may be worth the extra hour or two for someone needing a very basic intro or refresher.

Finally, while state requirements around attendance policies and time-off for staff often have more to do with tracking folks' hours than preventing the spread of sickness, disability justice, promotion of proactive mental health care, or other "health" topics, you'll want to write your policies in a way that meets the state requirements while also aligning with your philosophy and values. This update is being written in the middle of the covid-19 pandemic, when ALCs have generally found that our established practice of encouraging folks to take time off as self-care and community-care instead of striving for "perfect attendance" is exactly what these times call for in many settings. Designing around the health needs of your most vulnerable, aside from being a just practice, benefits the community at large, sometimes in unpredictable ways.

Zoning, Fire & Safety

There may sometimes be zoning restrictions about where schools can operate, but many communities allow schools and churches to operate in any standard residential, agricultural or commercial area. Check the zoning restrictions in your area if you don't want to get shut down for operating in a place schools are not allowed to operate.

Fire safety requirements for buildings generally often also have additional requirements for schools. You will need to be conscious of requirements around adequate (and safe for children) fire exits, appropriately placed extinguishers and alarm pulls, documentation of evacuation drills and inspections, and hours spent on fire safety topics. There are sometimes other more detailed requirements based on the age of youth you serve, such as requiring children under the age of 6 must be on a ground floor and be able to exit the building without stairs. Again, this varies. While many places won't require you to specifically have an evacuation plan for wheelchair and mobility aid users, problematically leaving them to be carried out by friends or firefighters, assuming "someone will just carry them out" is not an okay or sufficient safety plan. Be in ongoing conversation with your community to make sure you won't be leaving anyone behind or subjecting them to extra risk and pain in a moment that will be hard enough on its own.

General Reporting Requirements & Testing

States with compulsory school attendance or that are otherwise interested in tracking youth locations, development, and access to services will require youth be registered as either

school students or homeschoolers. As a school in such places, you'll be required to collect student information and keep an updated roster. Some states require you to submit this information, some require you to have it on file ready to be audited. It's recommended to keep such records for 5-7 years, and you'll minimize the stress of a surprise audit if they're kept organized and easy to access.

Information commonly asked for includes student legal name, birthday, enrollment date, grade, address, parent name and contact info, disability status, and potentially other demographic information. Immunization and attendance records may need to be submitted in annual reports, as well as graduation reports and records on the outcomes of any inspections.

Being in an independent school (or even a homeschooler) does not necessarily make children exempt from the state's standardized testing. Some states require all schools to administer tests. Some also require homeschoolers to be tested. Some make testing optional if you're willing and able to forfeit otherwise available state funding. In cases where tests are required, there may be options for tests that offer extended time as a default or call on a specialist in qualitative assessment. Some students do well with a straightforward and time-bound scantron test, knowing it will maybe tell them something useful about themselves, likely actually won't, and either way till definitely be done and off their plate once the timer is up. For everyone else, if extra time or flexibility in assessment design is available, it's worth taking, "needed" or not. After all, the tests aren't measuring what kids know; they're measuring demonstration of comfort with specific skills. Maybe performance while stressed and arbitrarily time-pressured is one of the skills being measured, but if it doesn't have to be maybe it shouldn't be. Just to check a state requirement box? Is it that useful and worth the angst? Most states that require their own specific test of all schools in their jurisdiction will allow anybody required to be tested to get tested at an existing state school or library for no additional expense. If you are required to administer the tests, you may need a specific certification and to sign agreements to store the tests in a secure fashion. You'll likely also be required to keep test results on file and/or submit them to the state.

Legal Structure

Disclaimer: This is written by facilitators and center directors, not lawyers and accountants. We cannot provide official legal or financial advice. Laws vary widely by state and country. Please consult a lawyer familiar with the laws in your area to be sure you are in full compliance, and we recommend hiring local accountants for your bookkeeping, payroll & taxes.

Do you need to incorporate?

Whether you need to incorporate – become a legally registered, regulated, and recognized entity – depends on your operations and organization structure. If you are going to create an actual school, you will almost surely need to incorporate; however, a homeschooling collective may be able to operate as an informal association. Requirements for opening a bank account or purchasing insurance may shape your decision. Zoning restrictions, reporting requirements, and considerations of how legible you want to be to more hegemonic education institutions or to potential funders may also help you clarify if and how you want to incorporate.

Some countries have laws that allow clubs, cooperatives and associations to be recognized as a named entity without officially incorporating. In the US, often you will need to file a DBA ("Doing Business As") or Trade Name Registration in your state, then apply for a Federal EIN to get a bank account.

Legal Structure and Bylaws

Different legal structures will offer different protections while imposing different restrictions. You'll want to look into the liability, ownership, and taxation components of each of your options. Aside from reading what you can, noticing what structure other childcare programs in your area tend to pick and, if possible, asking them why they made that choice and how it works for them may lead to insights that just reading descriptions and taxation parameters may not.

While your legal structure is primarily a tool for interacting with tax and legal systems, where it may be useful to have a clear executive director or owner listed even if in practice your governance systems widely distribute responsibility and power among community members, we still recommend aiming for a legal structure that reflects the values of your organization. Agile Learning Centers are rooted in trust. They are designed to support people contributing their gifts and talents, pursuing their passions, and constantly evolving in response to inclusive and participatory self-organization. Picking a structure with distributed governance, collective ownership, and where you can write bylaws or other guiding (and binding) documents in ways that reflect the role of parents, caretakers, staff, community, and when possible, students, in the operation of the school, is a step towards ensuring the values you profess are informing your practice at every level of the organization. You'll want to note that some states do prohibit the inclusion of minors on boards or other legal decision-making

bodies, but even in those cases you can often formalize a role for them as advisors from the community you seek to serve.

How to Incorporate

If you decide to incorporate, in most states, you can just submit a business registration online through your Secretary of State to file your initial Articles of Incorporation. On average, states charge about $50 to file. After that you'll still need to apply for a Federal EIN to be able to open a bank account. If you are running a school, camp, or after school program, you'll probably want to do both of these things.

Some states have special provisions and requirements for educational organizations and do NOT follow the normal process of incorporation.

Non-Profit and 501(c)3 Tax Exempt Status

Many countries allow special status for organizations dedicated to missions instead of to profit. For example, in the US schools, as educational organizations, generally qualify for 501c3 tax exempt status with the IRS, which makes donations tax deductible for the donors and may qualify them for grants or other types of funding reserved for 501c3 organizations. However, the application is complex (almost 30 pages) and can take months of back-and-forth correspondence to get approved. This is probably not a good use of time and energy of a busy founding team in early stages of start-up since approval may be retroactively applied to 2 years of contributions. Check your local laws and get feedback from folks who have already completed the process.

In some places, there are options to collect tax deductible donations before you register as a non-profit. In the US, for early stage operations, crowdfunding campaigns, or significant donations you can and may want to use another 501c3 organization as a Fiscal Sponsor. Typically, a fiscal sponsor will charge a 5 to 10 percent administrative fee and have some reporting requirements for how the money was used so that their records show funds were properly used for tax-exempt purposes.

Space

> iYari is an alive and changing place, full of trees and children's laughter, as neighbors there are some parrots that now that we are not going anymore still continue to imitate the cries

> of children. It is approximately 6 thousand meters and although we wanted it to be different it worked basically, there is a small section of books, material to explore the opportunity to build something more suitable to meet, and a cable car or tree house .... Well, the truth is that it is a changing space.
>
> Aliz Castillo, Iyari, Guadalajara, México

Selecting a location for your school can significantly impact the actual enrollment you see from your initial community of interested families. Whether we like it or not, many families are comfortable about the idea of the school while it is still an idea, but as soon as it becomes a concrete object there is a whole other emotional relationship. Many people will be excited just to have a dream start to become real, but some may decide they aren't interested in the part of town, state of the building, or required commute once you tie that dream to a pin on a map. Do not be surprised if you lose a few people over your choice of location. It may not happen, or they may not tell you this is the reason they left, but it's pretty normal to struggle finding an option that pleases everyone.

Your location will also impact the ongoing enrollment that you see. Folks are often willing to commute for a program that they strongly feel is right for their family, so if you're the only self-directed education center in the area or offering something others don't, folks will find ways to come to you from wherever they are. It's not uncommon for folks to move into the area of an ALC they like once they decide that it's going to be part of their family's world, and this has been true in both urban and rural settings. That said, the demographics and amenities of the area you pick will impact the diversity of your applicants. This is indirectly true in that the amount of rent or mortgage payments will become a fixed expense you need to set your minimum viable tuition in accordance with, but it's also true in that it literally shapes who can most easily get to your space. Racially homogenous neighborhood? Little to no availability of public transit or youth-friendly public spaces to hang in before or after school? Does the neighborhood use three languages but your staff only speak one or know a different three? Consider the barriers of access at play, which demographics have more or fewer resources to work around those barriers, and who the location of your school invites or excludes given those considerations. Sometimes the initial space you can afford will be less than ideal for families you really want to include, but if you are aware of the barriers going in then you can design your program and offerings in ways that minimize or actively counter their impact.

Where to Start

There are a few different approaches to finding and selecting a space based on what resources you're working with.

- Maybe you have immediate access to real estate. Do you have a family with a big house, a business with extra room, or a connection to someone who can gift or otherwise provide a space? If your group is in this position, then you can jump ahead to the later sections about Facilities. Or maybe your program will exclusively use public spaces like parks and libraries. You'll need to figure out legality, supplies, and emergency // inclement weather plans. You may still need a business mailing address. Generally, though, if you have public space available and a flexible crew, this can be a cheap and exciting option, particularly for small, informal groups. You can skip the rest of this section completely.

- Maybe you have access to money or financial backing. If your group has people who are willing to donate or invest in the school, or maybe sign to guarantee your rent or mortgage, then that makes some great options available to you that would otherwise have been out of your reach. Based on your sponsors and your budgeting, you should be able to figure out how much rent or mortgage overhead you're willing to have, and then you can shop for properties in that price range. If the financial sponsorship is enough to afford fees, you may want to have your start-up group ask in their social networks if anyone knows a realtor who could offer their services at a discount or as a donation.

- Maybe you don't have access to a space or to money: Many start-ups find themselves in this position – a lot of committed people, but no wealthy benefactor or available building. One option is to start out dependent on using public space (see considerations under first bullet point). If your state forbids schools from operating only remotely, whether that means online or off-site from a school building, you may not have this option. In searching for a cheap rental, one of the best places to start is by looking into religious houses of worship. A school can often share a space with the youth center and other meeting rooms that a religious community only uses on weekends and evenings. This strategy benefits both organizations and will often get you access to a reasonable space, but you will need to come up with creative ways to keep your things and their things in order, be particularly attentive about clean-up, and be ready to answer questions about religious decor or artifacts your end up sharing space with. You may also need to be ready to advocate for your community members if their gender

identities, dress, or queer kids' books somehow become an issue for the religious community. Sometimes you can work something out with small performing arts spaces and theaters that focus on evening and weekend operations, as well as some co-working and studio spaces that see the fewest clients in the hours you'd be most interested in. You may even find other independent schools or non-profits that have extra space and can use the additional income of renting out a few rooms. However, be warned that the playful and expressive culture of an ALC often clashes with the way that conventional schools expect their children to behave. Joyful learning doesn't always easily exist in the same space as sedated data entry work with hard deadlines. This can lead to conflicts or your self-directed education folks needing to constrain their explorations in ways that don't feel worth however much you're saving on the space. As with picking any roommate, it'll help to go into negotiations clear on what your priorities are and where you're willing to compromise for the time being.

Facility

Size

You need to be able to accommodate the energy and activities of your students. It is useful to have different spaces for different activities – some quiet, some comfortable, some for messier or louder activities. First, consider how many learners you'll have in your first year or two, and what their ages and energy levels they are likely to be. Once you have a sense of who you're designing around, you can ask these questions about different sites to get a sense of if they'll work for you:

- How many creative and energetic students can share this space?
- How can we divide it into different workspaces?
- Is it possible for quiet activities to be separated from louder ones?
- Is there adjacent outdoor space or a park for active play?
- Are there enough electrical outlets for computers, lights, or other equipment?
- Are there some available walls for whiteboards and projecting videos on?
- Will everyone be able to reach the doorknobs, toilets, and sinks? Are staircases navigable for our target ages, and is there an elevator or other accessible alternative for when they're not?
- Is there traffic or a neighboring business we would need to be wary of?
- Are the bathrooms functioning and accessible?
- Is there a kitchen or an area with enough outlets that we could use small appliances to create a cooking space?

Safety

Check your local zoning requirements for spaces with children of various ages. Sometimes there are requirements for certain types of fire alarms, or ground floor egress for younger children. You'll likely need to get the space officially inspected, either for certification as an education program or for insurance purposes. You'll need to ensure that there are no environmental hazards, like lead paint, asbestos, toxic mold, or crumbling floors and ceilings. Some questions:

- In case of a fire or emergency, are there easy routes and exits to get everyone out?
- Are the fire escapes safe for young children?
- Are the fire exits clearly marked?
- How many extinguishers are present or needed?
- Have I checked that the building has a certificate of occupancy and no outstanding violations with the local fire inspector that would prevent our legal operation in the space?
- Are there parts of the space that wouldn't be safe for children and would need to be closed off or otherwise restricted?

Equipping the Space

It is tempting to fill the space with lots of resources, but creation requires space as well as substance. Don't let your space become a dumping ground for toys, games, books, equipment, and "maybe it'll be useful someday" junk. The space should feel comfortable and homey to the kids, not boring and cluttered, and also not sterile and institutional.

Books and art should reflect folks from a variety of identities and backgrounds, both as creators and subjects. Pairing text signs with images makes the space more legible to a wider array of learners. You can use bookshelves as walls divide large rooms into smaller cozier spaces. Ask your community to help find couches, pillows and comfy chairs. Make clear places for children to put and keep their stuff (lockers, hooks, shelves or cubbies). Include large solid tables for art projects. You can also have spaces be re-arrangeable for different seasons, events or activities. Pay attention to light, airflow, acoustics, and the height at which things are placed. Tempera paint is more washable than oils, laptops don't mix well with sawdust, and anything that can become a sword or fort will, whatever stance the community has on weapons. However great your clean-up process and labelling of supply bins is, there's still a high chance you'll perpetually need to clean up food messes and mourn the demise of cap-less markers. There's never enough tape. Or "good brooms" and

dustpans. Depending on your community, you may decide to store glitter on a high shelf and hot glue guns on a low one. Maybe you store changes of clothes and communal bikes. Maybe you don't buy any games and the kids buy them with a portion of the school budget they manage for such a purpose. It's not about the stuff, and some stuff is more potential-filled than others. Have fun figuring out what works for you!

Storytelling Seeds: Name, Brand, and Message

Naming

Unfortunately, we don't have a magic trick to help you come up with the perfect name. Some ALCs have very plain and functional names, often just including ALC and the name of their city or town. Others have more poetic or creative names. Some groups have adopted "ALC" but expand the acronym as "Agile Learning Community." Some, especially those evolving out of older projects, keep their pre-existing identity and update it to include "ALC," or join the network and add our "Using ALC Tools" graphic to their website. There are lots of options.

If the name of your project is not clear at the outset, one good approach to choosing can be to brainstorm a bunch of names, do a websearch to make sure you wouldn't be sharing any with a nearby restaurant or company you'd rather not be affiliated with, invite feedback from your community to see if any get strong reactions, then pick a few favorites and try them out for a while. Try using the names in meetings. Feel how they taste in your mouth and pay attention to how they sound to your ears. Notice which one starts to stick and run with it.

Visual Brand Identity



Having some memorable way to present your name is important for brand recognition. You want people to have a positive emotional response when they encounter your name or logo..Beyond the name of your project, the image, layout, font, and coloring of your logo are all elements that will shape how people think of and remember you. You'll want something simple and clear, and that will outlast the current fads. Looking at the publishing house stamps at the base of book spines and noticing how they make you feel is one exercise that

might help you get in a logo-inspiring mindset. Looking at the logos of other ALCs on their websites is another.

The graphic designer that created the ALC logo and branding has some style guidelines for network members who want to incorporate the ALC logo into their brand presentation. If you want to create your own independent vibe and don't already have those skills on your team, then find a graphic designer who can help you. Getting your logo, font, and brand image in place early helps with all of your other marketing efforts.

Core Messaging & Target Audiences

Okay… Now you have a name, a logo, an educational model to talk about… but who are you talking to? ALCs are cool, but not everyone is going to care about what you care about, especially when your initial cohort is still small and mostly theoretical. You need to figure out who your trend setters and early adopters are, then figure out what message makes them want to come check you out.

Some examples of people who may be early adopters at an ALC:

- Students bored in the current system
- Parents who are familiar with Agile practices from work and are fans of the approach
- Highly motivated self-directed learners
- People into makerspaces and the maker movement
- Homeschool families looking for a more social environment or time working separately from their kids
- Social activists & changemakers wanting an alternative to a broken system
- Families with young children who they feel are losing their love of learning because of stress at school.
- People rebelling against standardized testing
- Families with children stressing about too much homework
- Kids with behavioral problems in normal schools
- Kids with clear passions or skills who are looking for a place that will support them investing their time in those passions
- Unschoolers who want more people and some support structure in their days
- People looking for Unschooling or Free Schooling places nearby
- Families where disability or health issues interfere with a kids' daily attendance and tolerance for arbitrary additional stressors, making conventional schooling's emphasis on these things painful

- Families who travel a lot and want a flexible schedule which can include travel as part of their child's education

Now imagine you have the space of a web ad to flash a phrase to get their attention. Or you have 10 seconds of possible interest in a casual conversation in passing. Notice how different the things are that you would say depending on who they are. Is it about testing? The current system being outdated and oppressive? Safe self-expression? Purpose? Play?

You probably want to be able to connect with all those people. If they have kids who would thrive in a self-directed community, why shouldn't they come to your school? The problem is that if you try to make a message that communicates "We meet your need!" universally, you'll fail to communicate with anyone effectively. You have to focus your message, especially at the beginning.

Obviously we can't give you your main message. It has to be yours. It must be tailored to your community and reflect your values and priorities. You can feel free to look at the web sites of other ALCs for ideas, but chances are you will need to alter what you find to reflect your own experience or situation before finding something that will work for you. Figure out what your low-hanging fruit is. Do you have a lot of homeschoolers nearby and a way to reach them? Are you active in a meet-up group for activist families? Are local tensions about mandated testing riling folks up? Pick one or two groups to focus on, and then get good at reaching them. Once you actually have your school up and running, it'll be easier to figure out what facets of what you do attract people, as well as easier for folks who maybe weren't excited about helping start a project to realize they want to send their kids to hang out where all those other kids are. You'll likely expand your messaging and then focus it again once you're established enough that your space-in-action website photos and word-of-mouth from parents who are excited to have traded fighting about homework for making dinner together start attracting enrollment without you having to go looking for it.

Once you know what you want to say, practice saying it. Try a single sentence version, a 20 second version, and a 2 minute version of summarizing your project and why they want to come find out more. Try versions that connect to different audiences. Pretend you're speaking to a potential parent of a teen who hates school, or a parent of a young child who is starting to be bored in school. Try some versions speaking to other educators, or speaking directly to prospective children. Don't just think through these pitches in your head, practice them aloud. Take some time in marketing meetings or founder meetings to have people practice. It can be awkward, but ultimately helpful.

Inroads and Artifacts

Once you've piqued someone's interest, they need a place to go to learn more, ways to reach you, and potentially an artifact that reminds them how to do so. You'll want to be ready for them!

Online Presence

People are going to look you up, likely on their smartphones and potentially even while standing next to you mid-conversation. What will they see? If you're still pulling together your founding team and don't even have a name yet, it's fine not to have a web presence, but if you're starting to do any marketing and outreach, you need to make sure you're ready to receive people as they come. For many people these days, that means carving out an online space.

Website

To start, you'll need a website. It can be just a placeholder in the beginning: your name and logo, a pitch, your address and contact info and program details. Cute pictures of kids. Staff info. Maybe some basic Intro to Self-Directed Education or What's An ALC content, along with whatever staff and founder bios you're ready to make available. Your web site can substitute for fancy print materials and all the things it used to take to look legitimate.

We know in some places it's more popular in some places to set up a Facebook page and have all online interactions channeled through that site. It's easy, it doesn't cost money, and when a large percentage of those around you spend most of their internet time on Facebook, setting up a page there can feel like going where the people are...an easy choice. And it's not that having pages or accounts on popular social media sites is a bad idea – it can be a great one! It's just that considering Facebook's history, making them the cornerstone of your online presence is a gamble that really isn't worth taking when it's so easily avoided. Aside from data privacy and page erasure concerns, another reason to have your own website off Facebook is that even most simple site-builders will have forms options that let you automate some of your admissions and enrollment processes. Having a webform for collecting health and safety records may not seem like a huge deal when you have six students, but it's huge deal when you need to keep, make available to all relevant staff, and submit reports on that information for thirty, fifty, or seventy+ kids.

You can hire someone or ask for a volunteer, but it's also fairly easy to learn to build your own basic web site from scratch using a content management system (like Wordpress, Drupal, or Joomla) or a web publishing framework (like SquareSpace, Wix, etc.). Someone in your start-up team can probably figure out the basics. You'll write your content, find images, make it pretty, etc. You'll want to buy a domain name you'll use for email, web site and your organization's online digital identity. It's easy to search for available domain names, but then you need to choose a registrar and order it. As mentioned above, once you're comfortable working with your site or have found someone to help maintain it and build it out, it can be really useful to use it to send people to webforms for working out tuition, confirming enrollment, updating emergency information, offering to volunteer, requesting to visit, or RSVP'ing to your events. Phone a friend if you need, but it's doable and worth the effort!

Email

While your Founding Team and facilitators will likely set up a group text, Slack, or other messenger service for rapid communications through each day, for official communications and workgroup updates you'll need to use email. Setting up alias emails, like admin@my-domain.org, can give you an address to use when registering with banks and government reporting system sites that you won't have to worry about changing later should your staff change roles. It's much easier to update whose individual address admin@ is an alias for than it is to update the address used at a bunch of finance and government websites. Planning for continuity and change while setting up these systems will save you many headaches later.

As your team grows, you will probably want to have some mailing lists you manage to make it easy to reach everyone all at once, like staff@my-domain.org or finance@my-domain.org. You can set applications coming in through your webform to get sent to admissions@my-domain.org. As you start having students enroll, you may want parents@my-domain.org, families@my-domain.org, or students@my-domain.org. You can set up mailing groups and forwarding addresses if you're using Google Apps for Education or Google Business. Mailchimp is also popular, and there are increasingly other easy ways to set up email hosting and mailing lists. Asking around locally will help you understand your options and the regional regulations you'll need to consider.

Social Media

Social media is probably one of the most effective ways to reach both parents and kids.

However, just because you build it doesn't mean anyone will come. It takes regular work to maintain a social media presence that communicates the voice you want and convinces the algorithm to show your content in people's feeds. There are too many platforms changing too rapidly for you to have a quality presence on all of them without getting sucked from the actual day-to-day of your project. Pick a couple and commit. It'll be less work if you pick a few that let you automatically cross-post content, but the content that does really well on one platform may not be formatted right to be successful on another. You really don't have to be everywhere though, especially once you have facilitators and young people posting about their days on their own accounts. Just pick what feels accessible and like a platform you can engage with consistently. And be sure to do some research about what data the platform will collect and use...Anonymized photos don't get boosted by the algorithms as much, but they also help make sure kids' faceprints don't get lifted for a Clearview AI database.

Learn in Public

In the spirit of a philosophy which includes sharing your learning as a crucial part of the cycle, publishing your reflections and project updates as part of your online presence can be a nerve-wracking but powerful move. Most of us like to have ourselves all put together before we invite the attention of the world, but if you wait for everything to be just right, you'll never be ready.

Showing the human side of questioning, trying, and sometimes failing can actually build greater trust and interest from new prospects than if you only present polished, shiny, marketing-ready material. In the end, families are trusting their children to the people running the school, and as your story unfolds they become invested in your journey. If you can establish a human connection and rapport with folks before you even meet, because they've gotten to follow along on your adventures somewhat, then you're ahead of the game when it comes time to talk about supporting or enrolling their child in your program.

Blogging is old-school, but it's still a solid option if you decide to write. New self-publishing platforms are always coming out – as this is being written, Medium is giving way to Substack, Patreon, and the rebound of email newsletters – but if you set up your own blog you have more control over your information and the content you create. Broadcasting will take more work, but you can just post the link on your social media pages and people will click through whether it's Substack or Wordpress.

One of the legacies of colonial education is the valuing of written content over oral histories and visual communication. These value systems are slipping, but if in your current deschooling phase you need someone to give you encouragement to share your shares in formats that feel aligned with who you are as a meaning-maker, even and especially if those formats don't center text-based storytelling, this is for you! If writing blog posts isn't your thing (or even if it is), you don't have to do it. Record audio, video, a time lapse, a photo series...whatever you're drawn to. Not all formats will appeal to all audiences, and you'll need to make sure to learn about and plan to include the accessibility needs tied to your format, like captions for images and videos, and transcripts for podcast episodes. But if multiple members of your community are regularly sharing, you'll each reach audiences the others won't, and your comfort with the format you've personally chosen will enhance your storytelling. There are lots of basic, free, and open source editing programs as well as some popular, slightly more advanced ones, and the teenagers around you probably have suggestions. As with your writing, you'll want to think about whether to use an existing platform for content sharing, which one if so, and what your options are if you don't actually want to give YouTube your faceprints and audience to monetize. There's obviously a few more steps, but you get the idea. Without too much overhead, you can be well on your way to becoming a video-maker or a podcaster.

Finally, a semi-public option that had fallen out of fashion but is becoming popular again is starting an email newsletter for the project. You'll likely write one anyway, emailing parents, caretakers, youth, and volunteers each week with announcements and reminders, but this would be an email that you adapt to be outwardly facing – so no sharing the cooking teacher's email or exact details of where you'll be when – and that gets sent out monthly or seasonally to those who sign up using a form on your website. You can use a service like Mailchimp to manage your mailing list for free and send out prettily formatted newsletters.

A proper newsletter service like this allows you to track who has opened and read emails. It allows people to unsubscribe, and it automatically cleans out bad addresses that don't reach an inbox (called bouncing). You can keep a large newsletter list and encourage prospects and fans alike to sign up on this list to stay informed. You can then update people about your progress, events, big news, etc.

A note on lead management: If you don't have a way to keep track of leads/prospects/referrals to make sure you are meeting their needs, answering their questions, inviting them to events, and engaging them in appropriate ways then do NOT start any major marketing effort. It does no good to attract people if you're just going to drop the ball when they show up. It undermines your credibility and professionalism. Better they

have no expectations of you than that you set them up with expectations you then fail to meet. Especially in a networked world where the unsatisfied customer is nearly always the one who takes time to write a review. See the section about Tracking Prospects for some tips about setting this up, but do NOT proceed with marketing efforts until you've put a sustainable system in place.

Offline Inroads and Artifacts

Local Phone Number

Get a local phone number. You don't want to have people calling the project and reaching somebody's personal cell phone while they're in a loud crowded restaurant (or whatever). You should be able to get a VOIP number from cheap to free. If you're in the US or Canada, you can get a free phone number from Google Voice. You can have that number ring a bunch of people's cell phones and/or home phones and even have voicemail messages transcribed and sent as emails. If you're in another country or don't want to use Google Voice there are lots of options for business VOIP providers.

Signage & Visibility

If you have a location for your school, you can attract some neighbors with a nice sign. Keep it clear and simple, like "Name, A school for self-directed learning, phone number, web address." Making yourself visible to your community helps build attention, awareness and curiosity.

Some founding teams are excited about designing shirts that make them visible as representatives of the project. This can also garner attention, especially as it leads to folks asking why their shirt says "children are people" or has some other provocative self-directed education quip. Not to mention that the design and printing, should you choose to print the shirts yourselves, can be a fun team-building project.

Printed Materials

You probably don't need to spend a lot of money on printing stuff; word travels mostly online and by word of mouth these days. That said, a few things can be useful as reminders or to quickly give folks direction to learn more about your project:

- Postcards and Bookmarks can be pretty, lightweight, and include basic information.

- Stickers are good for both handing out and for placing where they'll inspire questions, like on your laptop or water bottle..
- Business cards can be easy to keep handy and pass out to help folks feel welcome to follow up with you directly.
- Flyers with tear-off phone/web info can get a lot of engagement when posted in a library, makerspace, or similarly relevant place.

Key Details: Finances, Facilitators, and Flow

Finances

While an informal collective using donated or public space may have little to no financial overhead, most ALC structures will bring regular, fixed expenses, and a need for funding that covers those bills as they come due. For even the most basic project, setting up distinct accounts, thorough record keeping practices, and an arrangement with an accountant to review your work and handle taxes will long-term be worth the initial labor. Most projects depend primarily on dues and tuition payments from families, supplemented by regular fundraising, grant writing, and event hosting. We'll focus on tuition and fees in this section, since offering a sliding-scale to increase accessibility is simultaneously one of the practices ALCs are most known for and one of the processes folks have the most questions about setting up. Beyond offering a sliding scale, where what folks pay varies within a fixed range based on their situation, some projects arrange with families to volunteer or contribute sought-after supplies in exchange for a lower fee.

We seek to counter the social arrangements that price poor and working-class folks out of independent education projects, because we're invested in and practicing for a future where self-determination, the freedom to develop one's personality and gifts, supportive relationships, and pursuit of a life that's meaningful and satisfying are guaranteed to all young people (and really, all people). We seek to counter the social stories that insist a lack of access to money is a lack of wealth, efficacy, and value, so that in that same future a would-be carpenter or storyteller is celebrated rather than shamed into pursuing a more high-paying job, which may or may not confer the dignity and esteem it promises. Additionally, we know from history and current practice that solidarity and mutual aid, even when just called "being a good neighbor" or not called anything at all because it isn't questioned, enables communities to endure great hardships and accomplish amazing things beyond what would be possible if they didn't contribute to each other. It isn't so different from how self-directed education's misrepresentation as a new approach to education discovered and developed by

almost exclusively US and European white men severely limits what's possible by dislocating the current movement from established traditions and from ongoing organizing around raising free people, with all the wisdom, inspiration, and diverse models of leadership that still-unfolding history has to offer.In the same way here, in finance and sustainability conversations, the emphasis on currency and devaluation of other ways we've historically come together to meet each others' needs and unlock possibilities collectively sets us up to perceive fewer paths than are available to us.

Your organization's financial health, which is the focus of this section, is of course important. If your tuition discounts and alternative arrangements have your space regularly cleaned and receiving woodshop donations, but if your staff can't afford the groceries that they want and having enough for rent or the electric bill is an ongoing uncertainty, your project is not sustainable. You need to clarify your priorities – an available and functional space, your website staying online, satisfied staff, resources and support for current students, engagement and support for the already enrolled families in front of you – and make a plan to consistently cover that baseline. You can be more creative and flexible past that point, but you need to be able to say "I'm sorry, but the minimum tuition offer we can accept right now is x. If you can make that amount work, let me know and we can proceed with the admissions process. If not, you can check back (or we can have someone reach out) in a few months to see if our situation has changed." It sucks. Telling families they can't re-enroll because they owe too much back-tuition also sucks. That said, both hurt less and more briefly than burning out your staff or losing your building and tanking the project for everyone because you couldn't say 'no.' Once you can be more flexible, it opens up exciting possibilities so should be welcome complexity! Just make sure to be transparent and clear with your decision-making partners, so you can can put systems in place to avoid resentment, accusations of favoritism or discrimination, or assuming your prioritized needs are all still being met when they aren't.

Depending on the culture around discussing finances where you are, it may take some coaxing to convince community members to join the finance working group. Considering the group will likely discuss more personal information and be responsible for choices with more legal and tax consequences for both the project and for families, it may also not be a working group that's necessarily appropriate to open to all community members. One option is starting with a couple members from the founding team, board, staff, and other serious stakeholders, then having those folks expand the group as time goes on by asking newer community members engaged in other working groups for help and inviting collaboration from folks with specific expertise. However you do it, even if one person is primarily

responsible for managing invoicing and finances, you want to make sure they have at least one other person to talk things through with and be able to get their work checked by, both for the sake of the organization and for that person's peace of mind.

Opening Bank Accounts

Banks require a bunch of documentation and paperwork for organizations to open accounts. Requirements vary by place, project structure, and account type, but you will generally need:

- Articles of Incorporation to show you are a legal organization and possibly a current Certificate of Good Standing from the state
- Depending on how your project is legally structured, you may need minutes from a board meeting authorizing someone to open a bank account for the organization and also specifying who is authorized to sign checks. Your board may also want to place a check signing limit above which requires two signatures (like $5,000) to keep someone from quickly removing all the schools funds with a single check.
- Tax ID Number or Federal Employer Identification Number (EIN). You'll need a copy of the document the government gave you when they gave you that number.
- Government IDs for the signers who come along to the bank to provide their signatures for checks

Setting Tuition

How much to charge? There are a couple of ways to approach this question. First, we recommend looking at the prices of other independent schools or comparable programs in your area. An ALC should be able to operate at a lower cost than most local independent schools, but generally can't operate as cheaply as religious-sponsored schools benefit from free access to a lot of labor and existing infrastructure. Getting a sense of the options in your area will help you get a sense of where different price points would put you relative to that broader landscape. Remember, you're looking for a number or a range that is do-able enough for enough people to enroll, consistently pay, and feel the cost is worthwhile given the value of what you're providing. You'll also want a number or range that covers your basic expenses and leaves a little wiggle room for things like replacing broken windows or communal laptops, if not immediately then at least by the time you reach your target number of enrollees.

If you have a commitment to socio-economic diversity and want to serve a wider cross-section of your community, you may want to try a sliding-scale model. A tuition or payment

scale describes the highest and lowest amounts that families can commit to paying to enroll in your program. Set your target / full tuition rate (the high end of the scale) near or just below the average tuition rate for comparable programs in your area. If there are too many religious or otherwise subsidized programs skewing the average, you can exclude them. Then set the minimum tuition (low end of the scale) at 20% to 25% the target tuition or somewhere between 5% and 10% of the local median family income.

In this scenario, you are really mostly managing your AVERAGE tuition, which will probably need to be higher than half of your target tuition for the school to be financially viable. This will allow you to admit students who are good fits to grow the school's culture, rather than just those who can pay full tuition. You will still need to attract families that can pay higher tuition amounts, but we've found that explaining the process transparently often leads to additional generosity from families that share our values while filtering out those who highly value a socio-economically homogeneous peer group for their kid.

Determining a Tuition on a Sliding Scale

Many programs that offer financial aid use a third party service to dig into each family's finances, requiring detailed income, expense information, and multiple years of tax returns to provide a suggested tuition amount. We have opted to interact with families directly about their financial situation using a simplified and more good-faith approach, to establish healthy communication and authentic relationships from the outset, in alignment with our mission and values. The goal for each family is to find a tuition amount that feels both generous in valuing the education and responsible enough that it does not make a family resentful or threaten their ability to meet other needs.

You may decide to calculate how many spots you can offer at several price points along a scale, work out the income range that each point is suggested for, and design a graphic or web tool that lets families find what their suggested tuition would be. While this approach offers less flexibility than having each family complete a worksheet and figuring out if you can accept their tuition offers on a case-by-case basis as your situation changes, it makes maintaining a balance and communicating about aid availability clearer and tidier.

Alternatively, you may decide to create a worksheet that guides families entering income information into a formula which then calculates a personalized tuition recommendation. For example, the ALC-NYC tuition worksheet sums self-reported gross income from contributing family members, multiplies that number by 0.075, picks the higher number between that product and the minimum tuition rate, then picks the lower number between

that number and the maximum tuition rate. The worksheet has additional steps to adjust the recommended amount with a sibling discount or part-time rate. Finally, the formula includes a step to round the adjusted recommendation to a whole number, and that number is presented as the final recommended amount. This is an annual rate for a 9 am to 4 pm, Monday through Friday, September through June program. The worksheet is a webform where families don't have to see any of the math; they put in their income, number of children, and number of days attending, then the form tells them their recommended tuition rate. This process is messier than the stepped version described above, but it does allow for more complexity.

Whichever version you choose, or if you decide to try a different approach, calculating a recommended tuition rate for a family is just the set-up for the more interesting and agile process that follows. Calling on your Finance Workgroup in this process is essential. A sliding scale tuition agreement is a pledge between the enrolling family and the community, so to reflect that and foster an experience of fairness it should generally be agreed to by more community representatives than a single administrator.

The tuition-setting process often looks something like this:

1. At the end of the Admissions Application, the family marks if they are able to pay the full tuition or if they need to apply for financial assistance. If they mark "full tuition", the Finance Workgroup is informed of the offer and the tuition amount will be accepted by default if the student is accepted through the admissions process.

2. If the family indicates they need financial assistance, they are instructed to complete a Tuition Worksheet. They input the family's total gross annual income and, regardless of which of the above frameworks in use, it returns a recommended tuition amount based on their self-reporting. Below the recommendation, there is a space where the family completes the worksheet by making a tuition offer, which may be above, below, or the same as the recommendation based on what they know about their specific financial situation. At the bottom of the worksheet, there's also an "anything else you would like the Finance Committee to know?" box available as an option.

3. The completed Tuition Worksheet is submitted to the members of our Finance Workgroup for approval. The workgroup reviews the offer, in the context of the recommendation and the project's current situation. Often, if the offer is at or above the recommendation it is accepted. However, it is important to determine how the offer fits into the larger financial landscape (Example: you may not be able to accept every offer

that matches the recommended amount at the lower end of the scale, since many minimum tuition offers brings the average tuition down and makes the project less sustainable). If the offer is significantly lower than the recommendation, a representative from the workgroup contacts the family to get more information about their financial situation. If there is a situation where the project doesn't have any open "spots" at the tuition level the family is interested in, this conversation is also an opportunity to share more what's happening there and if or when more spots will become available. There are many factors informing what a family can pay, and we've found the most effective and honest way to get to a final determination is through direct dialogue. Again, the goal is for the family to feel like they are giving generously and responsibly, and for the Finance Workgroup to make sure financial agreements overall support the project's continued existence.

Tuition Payments Schedule

After collaboratively determining a family's tuition amount you'll need to present them with their payment schedule options – all of these details should be clearly laid out in the Enrollment Agreement (more on that later).

We recommend offering a couple simple tuition schedule options for families – allowing them some flexibility in how frequently they make tuition payments without overcomplicating things by having a unique payment plan for 20 or 30 different families. Remember: the more administrative processes you can simplify and streamline, the more time/energy you'll have for developing culture, supporting facilitators, recruiting more students, etc.

If you're formatted as a seasonal program or drop-in center, you may decide to collect payment entirely up front or on an "as attending" basis. For more full-time projects, whether operating in terms of annual enrollment or membership cycles, it's important to have some portion of the annual amount due paid upfront as a deposit. Doing so marks a clear commitment from the family to your ALC, and it provides you the funds you need to get things going. We recommend making deposits non-refundable and including that very clearly in conversation with families and within the Enrollment Agreement.

One tuition payment schedule for year-round projects that we've found to be supportive of project budgeting and palatable for most families looks like this:

- A deposit of 20% of the annual tuition amount is due with the signing of the Enrollment Agreement.
  - Suppose it is March and you're preparing to open the doors of your ALC on September 1st. Ideally, you'd sign enrollment agreements and collect 20% deposits between March and July.
- Monthly tuition payments of 10% of the annual tuition amount for 8 months beginning before the first day of year.
  - After collecting a 20% deposit in the spring you would begin collecting 10% payments beginning August 1st. The final payment of the year would be due the following March 1st.

This tuition schedule helps startups get some working capital at the beginning, when it is really needed, and supports more established ALCs continue to plan and budget with some degree of consistency. If you have the intention for your ALC to financially support you and/or other facilitators, we recommend avoiding a 12-month tuition payment plan, as this makes it extremely challenging to budget and set reliable salaries for staff.

In addition to the 20% deposit schedule, we recommend offering families the option to pay their annual tuition in one lump sum or two (bi-annual) installments. You may be able to incentivize this by offering a small (5-10%) discount to anyone willing/able to pay the annual tuition in one payment. Be very clear (in conversation and writing) that any and all tuition payments are non-refundable. Remember: the more of your annual tuition agreements you can collect upfront, the more reliably you can budget and make financial plans for the year.

Budgeting

Budgeting is a necessary and tricky process when operating an ALC, especially in the first few years. How you structure your enrollment agreement and tuition payment schedules will go a long way in determining how reliable and effective your budgeting process will be.

In an ideal scenario, you would have all of your students for each school year signed up and committed 3 to 6 months before the school year begins, or all your session students signed up and committed 3 to 6 weeks prior. In this ideal scenario you would also have no families move mid-year, new families decide self-directed learning isn't quite right for them, or situations where agreements are broken in a way where you have to ask people to leave. Everyone would stay, and everyone would be able to pay on time.

Especially when you're first starting out, this scenario is not very likely. It's very common to have your projected income (based on tuition agreements) fluctuate throughout the year. Even when the ALC is well-established, families will move and others will determine they're not ready for self-directed learning a few months into a school year. New families will also show up, and established families may offer an increase in tuition. Change is your constant, so having transparent policies, working group support, and clarity about what's movable and what isn't will be really helpful as you navigate each new challenge. Creating a budget is really a process of reflecting on and prioritizing the various facets of your ALC's financial operations.

The least flexible pieces of the budget are the fixed costs – facility, utilities, and other monthly bills, like insurance, internet, payroll taxes, etc. Once you have these amounts established, you'll want to look at what is left and have transparent conversations with your staff and the rest of the Finance Workgroup to determine salaries. It's also recommended that you determine what each staff role should be earning, even if you know you can't reach that number right away (this helps the Finance Workgroup know where additional funds should be allocated when they come in later on).

As an unfunded startup, you may not be able to pay everyone as much as you'd like, so making the full financial picture visible to these stakeholders is important. Those who are holding the vision and growing the ALC with you need to understand what resources are available and how they're being allocated. This level of transparency will also help garner more support for fundraising efforts when there are financial gaps to be filled. Sample Budget Worksheet

After establishing a budget that covers your fixed costs, base compensation for staff, and other financial priorities, a task you'll likely officially do annually but in practice revisit a few times a year, your focus can shift to managing cashflow. A budget only deals with the amounts by looking at the whole year at once. A cashflow projection deals with the timing of when money comes in and when it goes out, which is a distinct challenge to manage.

Projecting & Managing Cashflow

Your budgeting provides a basic framework and articulation of priorities, but the day-to-day reality of managing money is never quite as simple as the budget implies. The better you understand and manage the timing of money inflows and outflows, the more of that management you can automate, to reclaim time and energy for more of the work that got you excited about starting an ALC in the first place.

Principles of Good Cashflow Management

Some of these are obvious, but that doesn't mean they're easy. Most of us do not enjoy having the challenging conversations that are sometimes required to get cash in the door. We all want to be flexible and compassionate of others' financial challenges. If your school has enough cash reserves or reliable revenue flow, then you may be able to afford to be flexible with a very few families. Just keep in mind that your situation may change again, as may anyone else's. Additionally, don't make it a habit of allowing one person's financial problem to turn into a problem for everyone else too, unless you're willing to risk losing staff because you can't pay them, or losing your site because you're paying rent on time. As much as we sometimes wish we could help everyone, our commitment and responsibility to some will mean sometimes needing to say no to others.

Build some cashflow muscles by practicing these principles:

- Be clear about WHEN you get paid. Your enrollment contracts need to specify both amount and timing of payment. When possible, automate those payments. Of course, a related issue is being clear about when you have to pay – rent, insurance, payroll, bills, etc. If your finances are stable enough to automate any of those payments, it can also be worthwhile to do so.
- Don't spend what you don't have. On one level this means don't spend money that isn't in your account, but on a deeper level, it also means you have to have the timing of money set to arrive BEFORE you perform the services someone is paying for. For example, if your fiscal year starts in July, your school year starts in September, and you're paying your staff year-round, then you are two months into paying your staff before the students show up. The tuition deposit should have covered that, but the next payment should probably be by September 1st, that way, if there is a problem with a family paying it, you are resolving that problem while you're providing your service not after.
- Always keep a margin of error. Ideally, you will have some cash reserves that you are not spending in the case of normal affairs, or at least a line of credit that you can draw on if rent or payroll needs to get paid before some money comes in. But this also means that you should learn how much you should be underestimating your income, and overestimating your expenses. You will lose some families and have some unexpected expenses; it happens. Get used to managing your cashflow with an appropriate margin of error for these things.

When the timing and margins for income and expenses are clear, then you want to try to make sure you can have a nice automated cycle where you are getting paid before paying, so you can just schedule all the payments. Once your cycle of inflows and outflows is timed well, it takes very little attention and energy to sustain it. Managing your finances doesn't have to always be a continual source of stress and distraction from your deeper purpose. With care, and admittedly some luck dodging major expenses before you're ready, managing your accounts should become something you put serious work into at the start, tax point, and end of each year and can just check on a few times a month otherwise.

Getting Started with Admin Automation:

We recommend that you eliminate as much paperwork and detail management as possible. Presumably you aren't starting a learning center because you're eager to worry about money and fill out paperwork all the time. Set up your Tuition Worksheet as a webform that automatically sends submissions to your Finance Working Group email list. Make your payment schedule options check boxes at the bottom of your Enrollment Agreement, which can also be a webform if you're comfortable with e-signatures. Automate tuition invoicing, bank deposits, bill payments, payroll deposits, and tax payments. When these things are working smoothly, the remaining details don't feel so overwhelming.

- Just hire a small accounting firm for some of these tasks (bookkeeping, paycheck processing, payroll taxes, and annual tax forms). It may seem like you don't have the money to pay one, but the lost energy from being stressed about these things will detract more from the value and culture of your school than the accountant will cost. You should be able to find a firm willing to do it all for around $300 per month. Use the time saved to find another student, and just like that you've more than recouped the cost.
- Pay the small transaction fees to have people pay their tuition electronically and have it automatically deposited to your bank account. See below for how to set this up using Quickbooks.
- Direct deposit of paychecks will reduce your staff's stress too.
- Set up automatic payments from your bank account for your rent, utilities, and liability insurance.

Some people are afraid of automating these things, thinking "What if the money isn't there?" Start with just the small things if you have to, but ultimately wasting time juggling these kinds of details helps ensure your attention is NOT on enrolling new students, which is the

real way for the money to be there. Shift energy from repetitive administrative tasks to building the conversation about your program in the community, making the experience of the space irresistibly interesting and fun for those involved, and supporting a healthy culture. Stressed out administrators do NOT improve the culture or experience of the space for other staff or students.

Tuition Collections & Tracking

Once you set up a clear sliding scale system and have a workgroup to share the responsibility of your ALC's financial stability, you'll need to set up a system for collecting and tracking tuition payments. There are several services that can be used for this process and certainly new ones are being developed all the time – the key is finding one you can navigate easily, that is reasonably affordable, and that can streamline your administrative processes. It may take some time to set these things up, but the initial investment will definitely pay off quickly when you eliminate the need to manually track who has paid and who has not, track people down to ask for back-tuition, make never-ending trips to the bank to deposit payments, and manually update your books with every transaction.

Intuit's Quickbooks Online and Quickbooks Payments SAAS (software as a service) is one popular tool for this process. Quickbooks Online is the accounting software and Quickbooks Payments is an add-on service for generating invoices and managing payments online. Using these two services together allows you to create a customer file for each family, set up recurring invoices that get sent out automatically each month, collect tuition payments electronically, have transactions categorized automatically, and run cashflow reports easily on demand. TechSoup, a website with discounts on software and online services for non-profits, has a discount on Quickbooks that you may be eligible for. Then again, the fees may not be worth it for your project. Xero, Wave Accounting, FreshBooks, and Zoho Books are all alternatives that are getting decent reviews at the moment. Your accountant or bookkeeper may also have suggestions.

In spring 2021, Quickbooks Payments raised their fees for ACH payments. Some ALCs in the US have switched to Stripe for tuition payments because of this, though if you choose to use Quickbooks Online for bookkeeping and accounting, it may be worth the extra fees to have a payment system integrated with your books. Whichever platforms you choose to use for payments and accoutning, always look for integrations and automations that can reduce the amount of manual maintenance required from you and others on your admin team.

Payroll Set-up and Administration

In many places, managing payroll is a pretty complex process. Often, taxes and required forms of insurance on federal, state, county and city levels are supposed to be withheld from employee paychecks or else paid by the employee to the appropriate government agencies on either a monthly or quarterly basis.

In order to get all these figures right and payments sent to the right places, at the bare minimum, you should use accounting software which calculates it all for you (such as QuickBooks), or hire another company to process and manage your payroll. We recommend finding a small and friendly accounting firm that will process your payroll, keep your bookkeeping and financial statements updated, as well as file your required annual reports and taxes, rather than just a payroll processing company that will only process payroll and probably cost a similar amount.

They should also be able to advise you on keeping your employment practices in compliance with regard to health benefits, workers compensation, unemployment insurance, overtime pay, vacation policies, posting of required notices and such things. It is hard to keep track of all these things yourself, so this is a domain we recommend you find people you can trust to advise you. IF you develop a relationship with a local firm, they may be able to recommend other experts and resources to you if there are questions that come up they themselves aren't able to help you with.

Facilitators

We mentioned payroll, but who are you paying? Agile Learning Facilitators (ALFs), the adult community stewards who accompany kids, maintain the space, update daily records, collaborate and reflect with families, problem-solve with each other and work groups, and broadcast stories about your amazing project. Your ALFs will likely also include founders and administrators, who ground themselves in regular engagement with young people and families, but who do what needs doing and put their talents to ensuring the space continues to exist for everyone. As your team grows through their ongoing personal development and through experience, they may also take on mentoring new facilitators, interns, and volunteers. Every ALF will have a different style of facilitation and role on their facilitator team, and that's a good thing. Just as ALCs are not one-size-fits-all, there isn't one right way to facilitate that's effective for all of the varied, brilliant, creative humans that will come through your space. As the facilitators who wrote the 2017 guide put it:

> The choice not to call ourselves teachers is a deliberate one; while we may sometimes provide direct instruction, facilitation is something you do with a group, not to it. The root of the word facilitator is “facilis,” the Latin word for “easy”; a facilitator is a person who provides unobtrusive assistance, guidance, or supervision that makes it easier for students to self-direct their learning. Facilitation is the daily practice of being reflective, adaptable, empathetic, and honest. It’s helping children articulate the concepts and feelings they are already grappling with: an explanation of the water cycle because it’s raining, or offering the word “overwhelmed” to a kid who’s having a rough day and struggling against the urge to hit someone. Facilitation is playing with tools of the culture and the question “why?” Facilitation is playing tag in the hallway. Facilitation is developing the ability to tell the difference between and shriek of joy and a shriek of distress from several rooms away; it’s holding space for children to work through tricky tasks or emotional conversations with your support while resisting the urge to jump in and just do it for them. Facilitation is messy. Facilitation is structured externalized reflection and abrupt unstructured revelation...If that all seems like a lot, don’t worry. The practice of facilitation is just that - a practice.

The Practice



While the theory is elegant, the practice of facilitating is messy. Children are generally much less interested in foundational theories of self-directed education than they are in playing, socializing, creating, exploring, art-making, fort-building, and information-gathering. In that delightful, generative chaos birthing all kinds of universes, it can be helpful to remember some facilitator basics when assessing where and how the community most needs you to be.

At its most basic, the practice of facilitating includes 3 major areas of endeavor:

1. Upholding Physical Safety
2. Establishing Emotional Safety & Building Relationships
3. Making and Supporting Offerings

Keeping attendance, scheduling parent conferences, organizing space-cleaning days, and other organization tasks may be part of a facilitator's job description. Out of fairness you'll want to be clear up front when hiring people about any expectations that they'll be responsible for such tasks or be available to work outside scheduled hours (and yes, scheduling them for team-building adventure retreats counts as expecting them to be

available for work). There's a problematic trend in mission-guided projects of encroaching more and more into workers' personal time, often without consent or extra compensation, because it's assumed that "caring about the children" means eager submission to exploitation. Some facilitators may even come in having internalized this need to prove they care by burning themselves out hustling. This isn't okay, not as a model for young people and not as the pattern we want to set for the world those young people might become workers in. Deschool and break the cycle, and insist your co-facilitators do so, too. But coming back to what matters...Let's explore these key components of a facilitator's practice.

Upholding Physical Safety

First and foremost, ALFs help ensure that the choices made by students and facilitators are physically safe, legal, and respectful. Physical safety includes making sure that tools are used appropriately, people are accounted for, and no one's body is in harm's way, minimizing risk of serious injury or bodily harm. Confining options to those legally permissible helps ensure that the school can continue to exist and operate.

Kids with the freedom to make choices will inevitably engage in risky play. This is part of how they learn emotional regulation - you can read more about this on Dr. Peter Gray's insightful Psychology Today blog. If you feel unsafe with something going on in front of you, check in with yourself to see what's going on. Usually it's one of two scenarios:

1. You have been trained in your life to view the particular situation as dangerous (for example, kids using power tools). Your inclination is stop what is going on or do the task for the child.
2. You notice a hazard or risk in the situation that the child is unaware of that they should be alerted to.

If you feel like what is going on is legitimately dangerous, it is your job to intervene. However, there is a way to point out risk without using your authority to undermine the child's autonomy: reflecting risk or hazard you observe, summarizing why it is dangerous, and offering an alternative.

Here's a hypothetical - you walk into a room where a group of kids are climbing a wobbly bookshelf. Your reaction probably involves something along the lines of, "Stop! That's dangerous, get down from there!" While this response comes from a valid place of concern about the children's physical safety, the language implies that either the children are not capable of recognizing danger or, recognizing it, are choosing to ignore the danger because

they are irresponsible and reckless. This puts the children in a defensive position, and you forfeit the opportunity to collaborate with them to reflect on risk and enjoy the thrill of climbing.

Know that there is inherent authority in the ALF/Student relationship. Don't abdicate your authority. Own your authority while supporting their autonomy.

Establishing Emotional Safety & Building Relationships

Choice is a vital part of self-directed education; for an ALC community to thrive, all the members must make choices that respect the needs and feelings of others in the greater community. The biggest barriers to self-directed learning are usually related to fear, uncertainty, or anxiety. Creating an emotionally safe environment includes working with young people to keep the space free from bullying, ensuring everyone feels they can express themselves without fear, and approaching each student as a person whose thoughts and feelings are valid.

Notice if a child is feeling left out, lonely, or unsafe. Listen for how conversations are conducted when you are in the room vs. when you are not. If a child has been recently joined from an environment where they did not feel safe, those feelings can linger for a long time and express themselves in patterns of communication that are harmful to others. As with physical safety, use your observations to reflect when actions and situations that are emotionally loaded - make the implicit explicit to foster the behaviors you want to see in your community without using your authority to undermine the children's autonomy.

Beyond mitigating the bad habits and hurtful behaviors that we bring to ALC from our default cultures, it's the ALF's role to reinforce the understanding that learning is natural and happening all the time. Being in relationship with your students is the only way to know when to step-in and when to step-back. How can we provide the maximum amount of support with the minimal amount of interference in a self-directed education environment? Because there are so few examples in the world of self-directed education, it's helpful to children (and their parents!) to have the vocabulary to describe their learning. You can support them in practicing recognizing learning happening beyond what conventional schools would have taught them to recognize by reflecting when you notice development and skill-building. You may want to point out:

- Creative problem solving
- Leadership and coherence-holding

- Time management
- Critical thinking
- Decision making
- Planning long-and-short term projects
- Responsibility for intended and unintended consequences of their actions
- Traditional “academic” skills in other contexts (e.g. learning math by making change at a store)

This list can go on and on. Language is powerful, and by using descriptive language to give names to the skills that children are already practicing, we reinforce the understanding that learning is natural, their choices are valid, and they are creating meaningful lives and educations for themselves.

Remember that building and staying present in authentic relationships with young people is foundational to all the other work you’ll do. Supportive relationships where we feel felt are strong protective forces in our lives. At the same time, you’ll have the opportunity to model being in healthy relationships. One of the most powerful features of ALCs is the age-mixing of children and grown-ups into one community. The age-mixed environment provides kids with lots of models for different kinds of relationships; an age-mixed environment with a strong, positive, inclusive culture will support kids with a wide variety of emotional needs by offering a sense of safety as they begin to explore their own interests and self-expression. As a member of an ALC community, you are continually modeling how to be in community with others, form and support a myriad of relationships, communicate your needs and expectations, ask for or offer help, manage your time, try new things, be vulnerable, and practice gratitude. Practice mindfulness, because they are always watching you (even when you think they’re not paying attention!).

Making and Supporting Offerings

Offerings are like clubs and classes, except they are entirely opt-in and can be proposed and run by any member of the community. The person making an offering is the “coherence holder” - kids, ALFs, parents, volunteers or any combination thereof can coherence-hold for an offering. An offering might happen only once, or it might become so popular it recurs weekly or daily. Some offerings may require commitments beforehand, because they involve travel logistics, purchasing specific materials, or taking volunteer time. Where this is the case, it’s important to make the expectations and agreement to show up to what we commit to clear when proposing the offering...and to be consistent. Most offerings, though, operate assuming that children will come and go freely as they please. Offerings are most often

scheduled at Set-the-Week (more on that below), though they may arise spontaneously in the course of a day. There are a few different ways that ALFs can support offerings:

- Introduce offerings that are exciting to you without being attached. Remember to hold space for offerings brought up by the students so the space doesn't become filled with only offerings made by adults.
- Attend offerings made by young people. Don't worry if you're the only attendee; by virtue of being present, you and the student are making the offering happen (and once it is happening you may draw other humans curious to see what's going on…).
- Reorganize the space so materials are visible and easy to access. Think about laying "invitations to play" attractively around the building. Spontaneous play with new tools or ideas often leads to recurring offerings based around those interests.
- Research local volunteer/field trip/day trip opportunities to learn from people in your area.

Sometimes, offerings get scheduled but don't happen. It could be for any number of reasons - the regular participants of an improvisational theater class all happen to be offsite on a field trip, the kids who intended to play kickball are absorbed in finishing their watercolor paintings, the members of math club have been struck by what a beautiful day it is outside and would prefer to stay at the creek than come back inside. As long as there wasn't a commitment required, this is fine. The hardest part about supporting offerings is releasing your expectations about who will or won't attend. Actually, choosing not to attend an offering can be as important a learning experience as going to one: struggles to limit work-in-progress, estimate how much time a game or task will take to complete, or balance long-term goals with short-term satisfactions are powerful teachers of planfulness, are skills that children develop over time, through trial-and-error.

Further Reading:

- The Art of Facilitation and the Facilitation of Art

Employment: Hiring, Contracts & Firing People

Now that you're clearer on what a facilitator does, here's some direction for if you need to hire some...

A warning: Avoid any questions in your application or interview that would provide any basis for discrimination against a protected class. Don't ask about age, race, religion, sexual

orientation, etc. You may be legally required to post notice about job openings in certain places or for certain periods of time, depending on your location and legal status. Check what local laws are so you can plan accordingly.

Focus on what you're looking for in a candidate – someone who is good with kids, a good communicator, detail-oriented, enthusiastic about dance, or whatever it is you're hiring for. Be up front about the accessibility of your space, expectations around time off, breaks, and compensation. Be aware that if you require candidates to attend a training or complete a certain number of observation hours, you may be designing out candidates who would love to oblige but can't afford the lost wages or risk to the job that's currently paying their grocery bills.

That said, after applying and interviewing with staff, if at all possible have people come visit, spend time with staff and kids, and maybe even do a question and answer session with interested kids. This way, they're making their decision informed about the sensory experience of the space, and you can get feedback from the community about everyone's comfort with hiring the person. You'll want to communicate agreements clearly before the visit and ensure you have time to check in with all parties individually after. Listen especially carefully to student feedback. There is usually important insight in it.

Additionally, some kind of trial period when both employer and employee know their status will be re-evaluated can be very powerful for removing people who make good early impressions but prove to be unreliable in other ways. Even with a new facilitator who finds their rhythm easily, proactively arranging to have check-ins every 2 weeks until their status review, maybe 8 to 10 weeks in or before an upcoming break, ensures the communication channel stays open. Even once a facilitator is fully, officially hired, making a point of regularly setting aside time to trade observations and feedback will help you grow as individuals and as a team. Many facilitator teams meet on a daily basis or at the open and close of their weeks; you'll find what's right for you, but the support is particularly important for start-up teams and new facilitators all finding their way together.

Contracts

Clear contracts for employees or contractors are important to minimize any hard feelings and resentments that come from sloppy communications about expectations around work, pay or performance. A good contract won't necessarily make having to fire someone or accept their resignation feel pleasant, but it can at least ensure there's clarity for both parties and legal protection for you should such a situation arise. At least provide a brief outline of

compensation amounts and forms, payment timelines, responsibilities, and expected commitments/hours/attendance. Also, understand that if you specify the time, place or manner of someone's work, for tax purposes most governments will consider them an employee and not a contractor, and you'll both be subject to all related payroll taxes and insurance. Reviewing and updating contracts together annually opens space to talk about feelings that are coming up for folks around compensation or performance. These conversations can also be uncomfortable for people at first, but it can be really helpful and productive to have a space where you can share how much you appreciate their cooking with kids and need a different solution to washing the dishes after than the current arrangement, or where they can share that the raise being offered is appreciated but what they really want is 2 weeks off and a professional development budget. Maybe you don't write that much detail into the contract; but the check-in on the health of your relationship, just like you do with the project culture at change-up, will help you weather hard times and good ones in sync as a team.

Firing

Interestingly, in all earlier versions of this guide, "firing" was a heading for a section that never managed to get written. That feels appropriate; we know there's a chance that we'll have to fire anyone we hire – or need to be informed it's time to move on ourselves – but it's not something we like to look directly at or talk about, because it's one of those relationship transitions that can feel like failure, abandonment, or the death of futures we had started imagining.

We can be generous and clear, practice non-violent communication in transformative justice processes, hold someone in unconditional positive regard where we truly want their well-being and see their potential for growth...and we will still sometimes need to say, "I'm sorry, but I can't anymore." With kids, it may take many more failed attempts or an illegal or harmful act that's a deal-breaker before we tell them they've crossed our boundaries too seriously to return. This makes sense; they're developmentally in a different place than adults and are the people we've organized ourselves around supporting. We worry about who will help them if we can't. We don't want to be just another grown-up who rejected them. This can all be true, and it sucks, and sometimes we cannot be what someone needs, either at all or without sacrificing the rest of the community to this one individual...which isn't what we're here for. Same with parents. We may try longer and harder with them, out of care for their kid or commitment to not punishing a kid for their adult's behavior. Sometimes, though, we have to say "this stops now." Same with volunteers. Same with staff. Sometimes our commitment

and responsibility to the good of the whole community mean we will have to tell someone we have no more help or chances to offer them and they need to move on.

Being clear on agreements and expectations up front, with everyone, and being consistent and equitable in holding people to those agreements and expectations will help you make sound decisions and minimize “I didn’t know!” moments. Having a conflict resolution process, for use with adults as it is with kids, where you approach challenges as difficulties meeting expectations that you can work together to find ways to address, iterating and calling in community support as needed, can help when you’re wondering if you did all you could to give someone chances and support their growth. Keeping documentation – and sometimes generating it by, for example, emailing other staff or board members updates of verbal conversations you have with involved parties – will be reassuring to have on hand if someone threatens to take you to court. [Yes, it happens. Yes, it sucks. No, you don’t need to stress if you’re operating ethically and keeping decent documentation in situations that might lead to such threats.] Being clear on what your dealbreakers are. While it’s predictable and understandable when people don’t respond well to being called in, you may decide that responding to getting called into an accountability process with a threat or acts that endanger other community members and the existence of your project are grounds for immediate dismissal, outside the typical community problem-solving process.

Sometimes this is kindest. Pick your staff member, or member of the board or founding team or whoever, who is most able to keep cool and steady while being yelled at. Support them having whatever quiet prep time they need before and self-care or grieving time they need after.

If you’re that person for your team, be generous with yourself; do what you need to gather yourself to be present before and have the balm you need after. Some tips we’ve appreciated include:

- Acknowledge their feelings
- Clarify the message
- Stay on topic
- Use a strong and calm voice (“strong” isn’t synonymous with loud or aggressive)
- Depersonalize your role (not “my expectations are…” but “the agreements here are…” or “you know you’re required to…”)
- It’s not personal
- You don’t have to agree that you’re in an argument
- You don’t have to (and shouldn’t) give back what you get

- No one can own you; stay regulated by taking attentive inbreaths and releasing longer outbreaths
- Slow down

No matter how we try, we're not right for everyone in the world, and there is a whole project of people waiting for you to free up your energy so you can get back to focusing on them instead of being eaten up by this conflict. If your team has your back on the documentation and emotional support front, you should be set to quickly refute any legal threats, take a day off for processing time if you need, and celebrate having more attention for playing with the other kids and finding awesome more accomplice adults. Stay centered, stay clear, and do what you have to do to get to the other side.

Flows

Document Management

Mostly likely, your founding team doesn't live all in one house, or you don't have a dedicated file server for your school. It can save a lot of time in the long run to start out by setting up online document sharing. Google Apps for Education provides a lot of storage space as well as spreadsheet and word processing tools. If you don't want to use Google, and if you care about privacy there are increasingly reasons not to, there are file-sharing apps or many other cloud storage options. There are even open source options if you want to run your own server. Find what works for your needs and skill-set.

Set up a good directory structure for sharing documents, and encourage everyone on your team to share in that central place. In the long run, it will save a lot of time chasing down records and files. It's also a safeguard against turnover of personnel who then leave before you realize they were the only one with a copy of some file you need.

Not everyone's strength is in administrative work, and sometimes picking one or two people to handle bureaucracy to keep it from distracting the whole team from their work with young people can be the most effective move. You'll want to ensure, if you go this route, that you have a plan – that there's a log book or schedule or login vault – to prevent a situation where if your admin leaves or becomes suddenly unable to work you're locked out of everything you need to keep running the center.

Setting Your Calendar

You’ll need to publish your calendar for the year before families will be able to decide about enrollment. Though experimenting with changing the calendar over the first few years is common, ALCs often decide to stay open for minor holidays that would disrupt the weekly flow, close longer over major holidays so families can travel and facilitators can rest, schedule a few days of soft opening before state schools start up, and end the year with a big field trip and family event a few weeks before state schools close for the year (usually around when they switch from classes to exams). You’ll want to talk with your facilitators about their stamina and your families about which holidays they celebrate when revising your calendar for future years. Having an attendance policy that encourages folks to “take off” for any holidays they want to observe simplifies questions about whose religious or national holidays shape the official calendar, though it’s helpful for staff to be mindful of dates for relevant holidays, particularly if youth or family will be fasting (so maybe coming in, but not up to a big meeting or event).

Scheduling staff check-in days, community space cleaning days, and family conferences can be semi-spontaneous during the year. Setting these days aside ahead of time, though, allows you to cancel regular programming for those days without leaving families scrambling to find childcare. When thinking about how you want to transition into and out of breaks, you may decide to schedule these special community work days for right before a break...and to schedule plenty of time for games and open conversations, along with review of agreements and such, when you return.

Also in your calendar, though maybe not in the official one that you publish, you’ll want to put the due dates for any legal and financial reports you need to submit through the year. You may want to put reminders about payments for rent and payroll each month, for check-ins with graduating teens and new facilitators each week, and various social media posts each day. If there are any other tasks that you can set an alarm for and relieve yourself thinking about – sending a weekly parent email, taking out the trash, hosting a community support call – gift your future self a break and set up that automation at the start of your year. Your mid-winter self will thank you.

Enrolling Students

It is important to have an admissions process that provides a clear path for people to follow and clear status for you to manage so that people who actually want to come to your center don’t get lost in a complex process. You’ll likely have adapted processes for part-time programming and for your first cohort; if you start by mapping out your primary process, you can then easily create variations from that template.

A sample process for a more full-time program might look like:

- Prospect – You receive someone's information either because they contacted you or were referred to you. Invite them to engage.
- Orientation – A visit, phone conversation, or attendance at an event or Parent Interest Night. Invite them to Apply.
- Application – They signify their interest by completing the Online Application (and payment of any application fee and completion of the Tuition Worksheet if they are requesting financial assistance). Invite them to schedule a visiting period.
- Visiting Period – The student attends for some days or a week to see whether they are a good fit for the center's culture and capacities.
- Final Review – Negotiation of terms of acceptance (or rejection) including any special coverage for needs of their student, tuition amount, payment timelines, etc. to be put into their Enrollment Agreement. Invite them to Enroll.

You should at least track people's status in major steps of the process and you may also want to keep track of other touchpoints like communications by phone, voicemail or email throughout their admissions process. You need an organized system for keeping track of prospects that you are in various stages of conversation with. At first, little sticky notes and lists seem manageable, but soon they become a tangled mess. If you want to be able to follow up on a conversation from last month, last quarter, or last year, you'll need a well organized approach. We recommend having them in a shared space, shared at least with another facilitator if not an admissions working group, so that others teammates can pick up each other's progress if necessary. Here are some options from simple to sophisticated:

Collaborative Spreadsheet

Create a shared spreadsheet using Google Workplace, Mailfence Documents, Zoho Docs, or the similar service of your choice. Put a new student prospect in each row with columns for things like: Parents Name(s), Child's name, Age, Phone #, Email, etc. Then more columns for stages of the process: Initial contact, Attended Event, Follow up, Application Submitted, etc. Also, you'll probably want to have a big column for notes about your conversations, because you will almost certainly forget the details a month or two later after talking with 20 other families and children.

You can also use another tab/worksheet in the same document for tracking people once they've really entered the admissions process (submitted an application) to track the logistics of scheduling visiting weeks, collecting contracts, records, tuition deposits, etc.

Trello Board

If you use a tool like Trello for coordinating tasks in school workgroups, or for recording student Kanbans, or recording your CMB, you may find that it is fun to set up a prospects board with columns for different states in the process. Then you can move people's cards through the stages of the process until completion.

Again you may want to create a separate board for the Admissions process after students submit Applications, just to keep track of payments and the logistics of collecting their various documents.

Using CRM System

Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems can be very powerful and useful, but there is often a steep learning curve in getting one built, configured and keeping it up to date. If you have people with experience setting up and using CRM systems, and your team is comfortable using a sophisticated system, then you may want to try this out. In the long run, having a CRM system will provide greater value than the other alternatives in your ability to create reports, mailing list, and track touchpoints and participation of people. But in the short run, it can be a lot of work to get it started. CiviCRM and SugarCRM are also free and popular open source alternatives. Be sure you have someone with the technical skills to set up, customize and support your CRM system if you decide to use an open source tool.

Final Paperwork

- Enrollment Agreement: Yay! You have a family ready to commit! The first (and MOST IMPORTANT) step is to formalize the enrollment of their child(ren) with an Enrollment Agreement. This is the contract which makes them responsible for paying tuition and you responsible for providing a safe educational setting. (Link to Sample)
- Tuition Deposit: If possible, get your tuition deposit when they sign the Enrollment Agreement. If they can't make the full payment at that time, make sure the timing of payments are clear, and ideally automate them using the instructions above so that you don't have to keep thinking about it.
- Other Important Paperwork:
  - Emergency Contact Info (sample)
  - Medical Contact Info, Instructions & Authorization (sample)
  - Immunization Records (sample)

- School Exit Permissions (can kids leave the school alone, with teens, with staff) (sample)
- General Permission Slip (for field trips/outings with staff and volunteers, also for use of photos and writing if that's something you'll do) (sample)

Onboarding

Taking a few minutes to make a checklist of all the back-end tasks you need to complete when a new family enrolls will pay off in the long run. You need to file all their forms, but you also need to make sure staff get important information like medical notes and emergency contact numbers. You need to add the young person to your attendance trackers, and potentially set up recurring invoicing if you're using a billing platform that offers that. Many ALCs have a "Welcome!" or "Read Me!" document that they share with new families, outlining agreements, expectations, attendance policies, a basic schedule, and how to contact different members of the staff. Those documents take some time to put together, but they rarely need updating and can be really helpful as new families try to figure out what all these boards and hand signals in their kid's new space are about.

It's Alive!

Starting up your Startup

Oh my goodness! Not so far on your horizon is a date when your founding team and facilitators will welcome the first young people to your ALC! You've come so far and are going to have such adventures! The seasoned director-facilitators writing and editing this send our best wishes. We also recommend:

- Try to keep your personal schedule light as possible the first 2 weeks your center is open. Most people need a little time to adjust to the stimulation, exercise of presence, and continuous surrender to the unknown that's part of taking your cues from a bunch of self-directing young folks all day. It's normal to be extra tired at first, especially if you're running on a school-esque schedule. It won't be like this forever; just be gentle with yourself.
- Designate a place for tokens of appreciation and notes of gratitude that you receive over the years. It can be an envelope in your desk drawer, a folder in the back of your notebook, a jar on your bookshelf...Just have a place to collect glimmers for when you need them some cloudy day.
- Along with grounding breaths, curiosity, patience, compassion, and all those other typical things careworkers find necessary through their days, cultivating a strong sense of humor and the ability to ask for (and receive) help as much as you offer it will serve you well as the years pass.

If you are just starting out, remember that it takes time to build trust and strong cultural norms. You'll initially spend a lot of energy just demonstrating that you're "able, believable, caring, dependable, and engaged," as the public health ABC mnemonic goes. In the startup phase of an ALC, the most important thing an ALF does is facilitate the creation of a safe environment. This means both a physically and emotionally safe environment, with particular attention to how patterns of dominance and marginalization from the wider world show up and threaten to take hold in your space. The best scenario really is a team of people working together. It is highly suggested that there be more than one ALF holding a space; generally we find that a 1:7 ALF-to-student ratio works very well.

Trust is foundational to all ALCs, but requires particular tending in the startup phase of a community. If the focus is fixated on questions like "What are the children doing with their time? What are they learning? Are they happy and is it beautiful all the time, and easy to

clean up after?" then the environment becomes one where the adults feel like they must entertain, document, and find ways to prove the kids are learning and being "productive." This is what happens in most conventional schools where teachers feel a responsibility to prove their own worth through the accomplishments of the children, or when parents use the same "metrics" to judge each others' competence and moral character. It's not okay for the adults, and not at all fair to the kids.

Another quick note on startups: when you're first starting out there won't be a strong, well-established culture, which means the ways of being and communicating that new families bring with them can have an outsized impact on your fledgling culture. The stronger the alignment is between an ALC's initial group of families and their facilitators, the smoother the culture creation process will be. You will need to be clear about the needs of the whole community and discern when it feels right to say that your ALC isn't the right place for a child at this time. This does not mean anything is wrong with the family. It's simply that a startup school without an established culture won't be equipped to support every child's needs yet. Recognizing this early and being honest about it with yourself and the family, even when you really want things to work out, can save everyone a lot of pain and frustration down the road.

Intentional Culture Creation.

What Is Culture?

> "The complex world today requires us to be aware of how our perspectives, ideologies, and worldviews have been formed — from our education and culture, what we learned from our parents, and what our parents learned from their families and culture. We don't need to necessarily negate our perspectives. But we do need to inquire into the assumptions behind these perspectives so as to embrace them differently, based on who we are, what we stand for..."
>
> Monica Sharma, *Radical Transformational Leadership*

In general, culture can be defined as the customs, beliefs, norms, and way of life of a society or group. For most of us, we often think of culture in terms of the macroculture - the overarching or dominant culture of our society. Terms like Pop Culture or Internet Culture are a type of macroculture that we tend to experience as something we're born into relationship with and that influences us in one way or another.

Then there's the idea of a subculture, like worlds of bicycling, hip hop, and beekeeping. These are smaller cultural groups within the larger macroculture that are organized around more specific ideas, interactions, or ways of being. Within a subculture, you may not be completely anonymous and detached like you are in the macroculture. In a subculture, you can point to the specific people and ideas that have shaped its identity. You are more likely to actively participate in a subculture, rather than simply exist within it as you do in the macroculture.

Drill down a little further and we have the idea of a microculture, a smaller, specialized subgroup that may have its own jargon, rituals, ethos, and agreements. The uniqueness and power of a microculture lies in the balance of existence of both the individual and the collective: the ability for each individual to shape the whole and for the whole to shape each individual.

The goal of a successful ALC is to nurture a microculture where children feel safe, valued, capable, and free to self-direct their learning in creative, authentic ways. Where macroculture and even subculture can feel too ubiquitous and entrenched to influence – although we could debate that assessment of things – a microculture emerges from our relationships and takes its qualities from our contributions to it. Deliberately aligning on our values and regularly checking in to see if our daily choices are creating a culture we're excited about positions us to shape change, to collaboratively create the community and cultures that will let all of us thrive.

Creating a Microculture

In our experience, it's much more powerful to define the positive elements of your ideal culture and work towards those, rather than trying to suppress the negative elements you don't want and expect the positive to emerge from the gaps. Of course you'll need clear statements of what's unacceptable in your space – like no firearms, illegal substances, or hate speech – but your ongoing choices and conversations should focus on the vision and values under those boundaries – like safety, the continued existence of the project, and freedom from bullying and harassment.

Human brains are fascinating; if we tell you not to think about a pink elephant sitting in the corner, it's likely that your brain will conjure that exact image whether you were trying to or not. It's the same with creating microcultures: we give power to ideas by articulating them. What do you want to give your attention to growing? A solid place to start is with basic Foundational Agreements. Invite young people and facilitators to brainstorm the kind of culture they value, what they need to feel welcome and supported in the learning center, and

create community agreements in response to what the group shares. Many times, what we want at a fundamental level is very similar: a peaceful community, to feel safe, to feel respected, to have choices, etc.

Many young people will be more able to engage in a conversation after having an experience, so sitting down in a room and asking them to come up with community agreements might leave you with blank stares and silence! Exploring the topic as you play and reflect on games, or in casual conversation, can set folks up to come to more official conversations with some ideas already bouncing around their heads. Like all our agile processes, the process of creating community agreements is intentionally iterative, so don't be surprised if it takes a few rounds of experimentation to find a formula that feels satisfying for everyone.

Additionally, children are not adults. We trust them to know their bodies, feelings, interests, and sense of what makes for a worthwhile life for themselves, but that doesn't mean pretending they have as much data as adults about the world and never need scaffolding. While human brains are pretty remarkable across variations and lifespans, they aren't all good at the same things at any point in time. Consider the age and developmental needs of the children at your ALC and decide from there what will create the most positive cultural impact. Maybe your cohort will want to set and fine-tune their base agreements through several weeks of philosophical debates and reflection. Maybe agreements from other spaces are presented – this isn't just an ALC practice so there are many examples to choose from – then kids pick and choose a few that they want to copy. Maybe you all decorate a big sheet of paper with pictures of things that make you feel happy and safe, an adult asks the kids what they will promise to try to all do for each other to keep the space feeling good for them, kids share and someone scribes their answers with a marker on the same page as their drawings, then everyone "signs" the paper together and it gets hung prominently in a common space. Trust the kids, and meet them where they are.

Consider these questions as you are in your space:

- How much time is spent talking about culture creation and developing agreements, and does this amount of time need to adjust?
- Are there games and activities that you can offer to promote the cultural skills you want your community to practice? Examples include improvisation games, team scavenger hunts, and role playing games, among others.
- Have new students joined the program and you're noticing a change? Is it the beginning of the school year or a re-start after a break, when folks are reassessing who they want

to be to each other and how they want to show up? Do the folks remember why your practices are in place, or are they doing things because "that's the way they are done?"

- Are people in the space feeling resentful? Are the same conflicts showing up repeatedly? Could a change to specific practices or agreements shift things? More of the same will not make change; maybe it's time to post an awareness on the Community Mastery Board, ask the community for help, and come up with something different to try.

Foundational Agreements

In order for everyone in the community to have equal opportunity to pursue self-directed education in an environment where they feel safe and supported, they must be able to share space, time, materials, experiences, and resources with the other people at that ALC. While negotiations about what that looks like will be complex and ongoing, it's vital that everyone involved knows what kind of environment they are opting into before the community begins to engage with the process of building a microculture.

To that end, decide what the non-negotiables are for your space, make sure those are discussed during your admissions and enrollment conversations, and either go over them with students when you go over enrollment contracts with their adults or make sure they're included in the all-community conversations you have with kids to come up with their list of basic agreements. How lunch messes get cleaned up and whether pets can visit are up for discussion; doing fire experiments in the computer room or playing with someone's Epi-Pen cannot be. Be clear as possible from the beginning. Many spaces like the structure of a "Student Agreement" contract: a few, clear and simple as possible written agreements that make explicit the expectations of the community and give the students the choice to opt in. If they don't, or it turns out they can't hold those agreements, they can't be a part of the ALC community." Many spaces have the students sign them either on the first day of the program each year or upon their enrollment if they arrive mid-session.

Revisit these items regularly to decide if change is necessary. Also, consider your age range. If the children are too young to actually understand what they are agreeing to, it might not be useful to have them sign an agreement. Here are two examples of Student Agreements from established ALCs:

- ALC-NYC's 2016-17 Student Agreement
- ALC Mosaic's 2016-17 Student Agreement

Meetings and Practices

There's a tricky balance to strike with meetings - too much imposed structure and you lose buy-in from the groups, not enough structure and everyone goes home at the end of the day unsure what they've accomplished. As a rule of thumb, try and keep meetings as short and efficient as possible - 10-15 minutes for morning and afternoon meetings, and 25 to 30 minutes for Change Up and conflict resolution meetings that require more in-depth discussion.

Reminder: You can't build a high-functioning culture by selectively borrowing a few things you like or "acting" like an ALC without being willing to challenge your personal social patterns. You won't establish cultural stability if you are inconsistent. This means both staying self-aware to align your practice with your theory, and staying dependable for holding the principles and processes the community decides on. Being able to rely on, for example, a morning check-in, afternoon check-in, and a "stop rule" or community safe-word throughout the day, allows an anxious or lonely kid reassurance that opens space for them to play and explore through the day rather than worry about if they're cared about or able to ask for pauses in games. Be the adult you've told the kids they can trust you to be.

Here are some of the kinds of meetings and rituals that help scaffold ALC rhythms.

Set-the-Week Meeting

Set-the-Week is a schedule-creating meeting that happens at the start of a cycle, usually first thing on Monday morning for programs operating on weekly cycles. At this meeting, the group discusses offerings and co-creates the schedule for the upcoming week or spring. It's usually a mandatory, all-group meeting that allows the whole community to start the week on the same page.

Using a Set-the-Week agenda board to make the schedule and keeping it in a prominent place allows people to check in throughout the week to see what is happening. If guest teachers, parents, visitors, or volunteers are coming into the space to hold an offering, or there is a recurring offering that happens at a set time, it can be helpful to put these more fixed offerings onto the board before the meeting starts so more flexible activities can be planned around them.

This can also also be a time when we identify projects that are going to take multiple days to accomplish, plan field trips, and set weekly intentions. Depending on the scope of a

project, we might set time aside each day to work toward that goal. Most spaces list the place, time, and host of each offering along with the offering title on the board – and remember that the offerings are only ever a partial reflection of what the week will become! Commitment is a semi-regular theme of the conversations during these meetings, as offering hosts learn what it takes to commit to hosting, young people practice committing to offerings where advanced planning is important then sticking with their commitments even when a spontaneous park trip looks like it'll conflict, and everyone negotiates how much feels fair to expect of themselves and each other day to day.

Making the schedule available in digital form – many centers send out an email at the start of each week or spring with announcements and a schedule link – makes it easier for young people to check the schedule even when they aren't in the space, as well as for their grown ups to help them prepare for and make choices about their plans for each day.

Morning and Afternoon Meetings

Early on, we attempted to open and close our days with whole community stand-up meetings like we saw Agile Software folks doing. It turns out that stand-up meetings – and "scrum" if you're familiar and wondering – didn't scale well with our age-mixed groups. Some small groups still do these meetings all together, and we know some projects with very young kids hold them as more of an informal "come to circle time on this blanket if you want to" offering. In most ALCs though, Morning and Afternoon meetings bookend each day, signaled by a time-keepers alarm (often a song on someone's cell phone), and folks split into small, consistent groups for these meetings. Depending on the humans involved, 6-7 is likely the maximum size to aim for. Meeting groups, sometimes called "spawn points" after the videogame term, are analogous to homerooms in a traditional school, so in addition to being a time for connecting it's a time for the facilitator to do things like take attendance and help learners document their notes for the day. The purpose of these bookend meetings is to:

- Mark the start of the day setting intentions for it, and mark the close of the day reflecting on what actually happened.
- Support connection among individuals in a smaller, safe, comfortable setting.
- Create space for ALFs to support young people with documentation of their learning, whether that's updating Kanbans on whiteboards, Trello, or making daily doodles in a notebook.
- Provide an opportunity for ALFs or kids to test out different agreements and facilitation styles in a smaller group environment (a microculture within a microculture!) Maybe as

prep for introducing it to the larger group, but maybe just to fine-tune their own facilitation skills.

Gratitude Circle

Gratitude Circle (also called Gratitudes) can be implemented as a daily or weekly meeting to take intentional time for sharing things we're grateful for in our lives and our schools.

A sense of ritual can be created during Gratitudes in whatever way feels good to your community. We find that the practice typically opens with some kind of focusing game, followed by sharing of gratitudes, acknowledgements, or general reflections. You can make Gratitudes optional or mandatory, although we find the optional meeting to be a more thoughtful gathering than the mandatory one. A gameshifting board can help ground the practice.

The Gratitude Circle is designed to deepen relationships and to give ourselves the power to write a positive record of the day, while over time creating a culture that emphasizes joy, play, gratitude, and healthy relationships over narrow definitions of failure and success. You could try lighting a candle to mark the start of the circle. You might pass a listening stick around as the tool for sharing. You could open and close the circle with a song. You can write your gratitudes before meeting or improvise them on the spot. Use whatever feels right, inspired, and good to you. While some folks have held that Gratitudes should be a serious and focused reflection time, many of our communities appreciate a meeting filled with shared giggles and gentle jokes as equally powerful bonding experiences.

Change-Up

Change-up meetings are attended by the whole community and usually occur near the end of a sprint. They involve use of the Community Mastery Board to frame a conversation about how things are going in the community, brainstorm possible solutions to problems and other adjustments to group agreements, pick changes folks can all consent to try for a sprint then circle back on, and circle back on things the community decided to try in previous weeks and needs to decide whether to continue with or release. This isn't a time to flesh out all the reasons why a solution may be a good idea or not; just a quick brainstorm and a decision to try something for a week.

If sitting through the whole Change-Up process is a challenge for your community, developmentally or for other reasons, there are a couple of ways to modify it. You might

decide to ask the group to post all awarenesses before meeting time then pick a manageable number to limit your Change-Up meeting to discovering with each sprint. Or, you might split the meeting into two parts: Check-In and Change-Up. Check-in then becomes the mandatory meeting where community members present awarenesses, while the brainstorming and implementation of solutions to test are left for the optional Change-Up meeting. In this formulation Change-Up can be held right after Check-In or at a later time in the week. While splitting up the awareness-raising and solution-finding in this way can mean that some members of the community are not a part of the rule-making process, we do like to remind students that decisions are made by the people who show up.

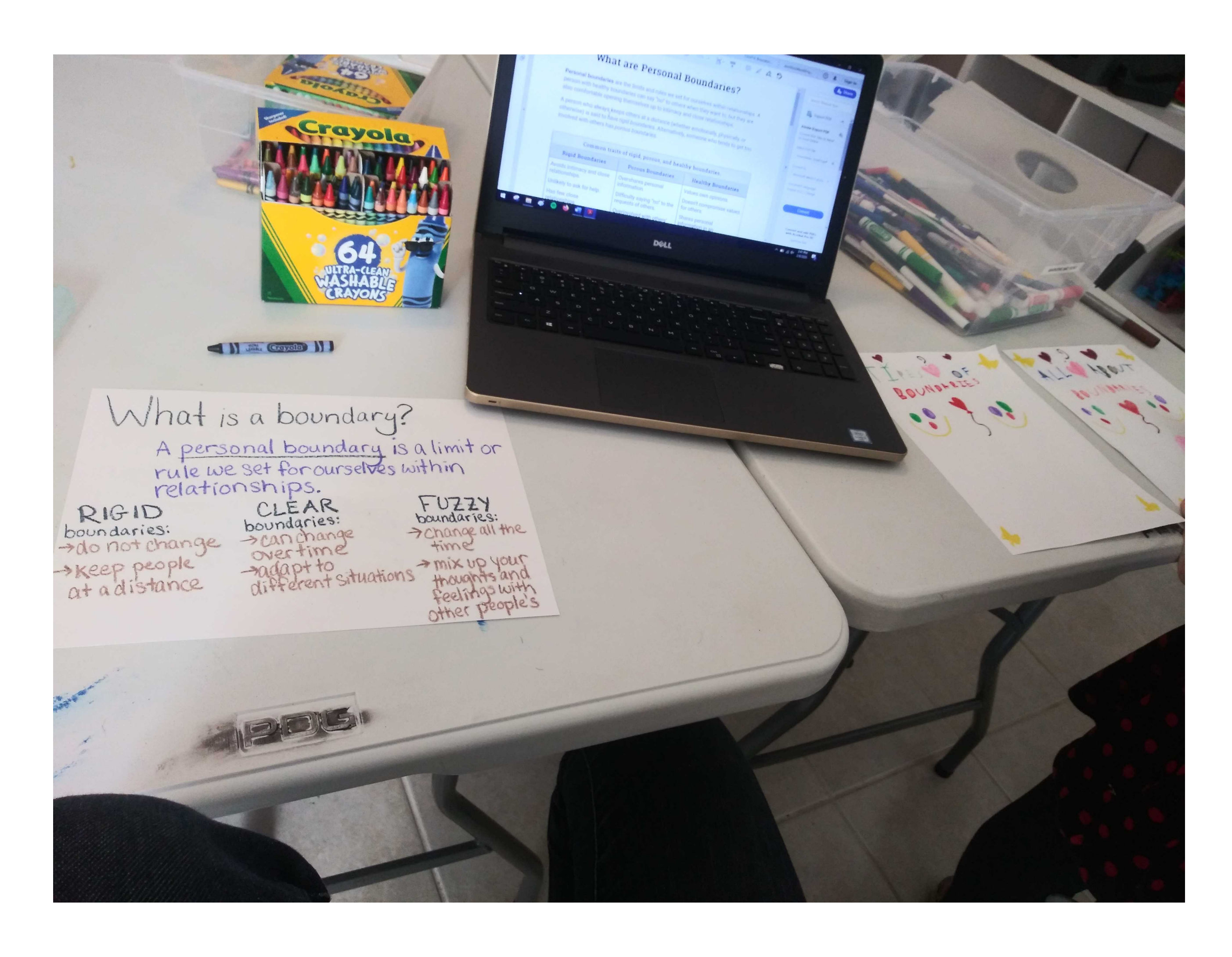
Clean Up

Tending the culture, evolving agreements, developing supportive relationships, sharing rituals, and making time to play together are all ways of collectively caring for an ALC. Sometimes, though, our communities also need more tangible care. The space and supplies that are our supports to enjoy are also our responsibilities to maintain. This includes easy agreements like getting consent before destroying or significantly altering common furniture, and it includes fun conversations like planning for paint changes and murals. It also means figuring out how you're going to approach clean up. While there are stories of democratic free schools where students voted to allocate some of their resource budget to paying someone to clean up after them – the anecdotes don't make clear if they still cleaned their personal messes through the day, but they do agree the kids quickly decided some extra sweeping on their part was worth having the extra games and tools they could use that money on instead – ALCs tend to include cleaning together as both a basic agreement and end-of-day ritual.

This is a topic you'll definitely address in Change-Up on an ongoing basis. Creativity can be messy, and having clear clean-up agreements will help many folks respond to slime experiments and massive fort projects with delighted curiosity rather than dread. Will you use a rota, a wheel of tasks? Checklists with pictures? Teams responsible for different zones? How do you make participating in cleanup a less frustrating experience for humans still developing the skills needed to clean well, the coordination sweeping requires or the ability to look at a room and recognize what needs to be done? How much of a warning do people need before cleanup time starts so they can wrap up their endeavors and be ready to transition? Do you have different agreements for cleaning food messes and paint spills through the day than you have for less pest-attracting and trackable messes? Do people need time to clean their personal messes before going to their clean-up jobs, or do you have a group that wants to try cleaning their personal messes through the day as they make

them? Does your clean-up have a DJ or a list of folks who have agreed to help others or fill in when someone is absent?

Even when you find what works for you, you'll need to adjust as the community changes and still plan time for staff to thoroughly clean the space on a regular basis. Maybe that looks like days families host all the kids off-site so staff can clean the empty space together, maybe it means ALFs take turns deep cleaning different rooms one-at-a-time during the day across the span of a few weeks so that labor isn't invisibilized, or maybe it means time at the beginning of each day or end of each week when kids are welcome in the space but the expectation is that staff will be focused on cleaning tasks. You may want to plan all community (families included) cleaning days seasonally, where you deep clean, rearrange, paint, purge, plant, and celebrate with some kind of treat at the end. These practices can be satisfying or even kind-of fun once your community understands the 'why' and gets into a rhythm.



Conflict

Sometimes we break agreements, struggle meeting community expectations, or hurt and let down others. Even when we try our best to do right by each other, we all mess up. It's part of being human. Broader cultural norms have many of us conditioned to avoid conflict or to focus on punishment in these situations, but those responses are neither healthy nor productive. Who does minimizing or denying a problem protect, and what messages does it send? How does adding harm to the situation with an arbitrary punishment get us information about folks' unmet needs and ways we can prevent the situation from recurring? We may also have become practiced at seeing a someone else – especially a child – uncomfortable or facing a conflict, and taking that as a sign to swoop in and rescue them. Whether such "helping" is a holdover pattern from when they were little and more helpless, our ego showing up as a need to be needed, or fear that they're not equipped to handle some struggle, what it doesn't do is support them learning what they're capable of or convey to them that we see them as capable. Even when we get clear that we don't want to react in any of those ways, we're prone to regress to old patterns when we're tired, angry, scared, or uncomfortable. To seed change, we have to deschool our relationships to fears, insecurities, shame, conflict, and even hope. We have to spend time with definitions we'd not questioned before, remaking them and dreaming of what real justice and transformation could feel like. We have to, in easy times, build rapport and understanding that allow us to stay grounded when challenging situations stretch us. And we need a clear plan for what we're replacing our old patterns with.

So what do we actually want when there's a conflict in our community? First, we want to stop any immediate harm and make sure everyone is safe. Then we want to center the needs of the hurt folks, understand what happened, and determine what kind of conflict resolution process is appropriate. In rare situations, this will mean the facilitators determine a community process would cause more harm and so would take over. More often it means calling folks to circle up for a discussion of what's needed from individuals and the community at large to address everyone's needs, support healing and transformation, and continue forward together. Because ultimately that's what we want: a healthy community that's safe for many different people to come as they are and grow into their potential together.

Having clear agreements and a clear conflict process helps set everyone up to recognize and address problems. Having feelings charts around the space, and a cultural conversation that values feelings beyond "happy" for their authenticity and information, helps folks develop emotional literacy. Modeling mindfulness, clear boundary setting, and FRIES consent with kids of all ages will help them learn to have healthy relationships. The FRIES framework

from Planned Parenthood specifies that consent is, by definition, freely given, reversible, informed, enthusiastic, and specific. There are plenty of cute infographics about it online, commonly used in our spaces accompanied by the "Tea Consent" video available online from Blue Seat Studios. Having a safe word – popular ones include "Stop Rule" and "Pause" – that folks can use to call for a break from a game, conversation, or dynamic empowers folks to gift themselves a time out when they're starting to get overwhelmed. Having a room that's got limited stimuli, soft furniture, and a weighted blanket, white noise machine, or tea kettle available gives folks a clear place to retreat to. Learning and passing on grounding techniques, or making posters illustrating them, can also be a way to ensure community members are equipped with tools for when their feelings are a lot. Taking three deep breaths with longer exhales than inhales is one technique that's popular and easy to practice with young people. Stopping to name 5 things you can see, 4 things you can touch, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell, and 1 thing you can taste is another technique that's fairly accessible and that translates well to poster format.

There are lots of useful resources for facilitators and young people who want to improve their deescalation and mediation skills. meenadchi's "Decolonizing Non-Violent Communication" and the workbook "Fumbling Towards Repair" by Mariame Kaba and Shira Hassan are both useful texts, and facilitators also often share gratitude for the work of Brené Brown, Thich Nhat Hanh, Dr. Ross Greene, and others who address conflict-adjacent topics.

At most ALCs, the conflict process usually has three phases. In the first phase, someone realizes they are in a conflict, pauses to breathe and assess their needs, then tries to talk to the person/people they're in conflict with. If the issue persists, the second phase includes asking for help from a third party, another young person or a facilitator who agrees to mediate communication and problem solving. If there's still an issue after the mediated conversation is attempted, the third phase is to request the help of the Culture Committee.

The Culture Committee is a group of young people and facilitators who have committed to take this role in actively caretaking the community culture. It is not a judicial body concerned with blame and punishments, though it may determine in some cases that accountability includes accepting consequences for our actions, like needing to paint over inappropriate graffiti or help fundraise to repair the shared laptop that got broken. The Culture Committee's role is twofold:

- Conflict Resolution: After listening to how involved parties understand their conflict, the Culture Committee works with them to identify the needs and values involved in the

situation, including those of the community as a whole. With that information, the group then works together to brainstorm solutions that everyone can agree to try. Centering the needs of the person who was hurt, where there was hurt, is important, and so is asking what the community can do to support the person who caused the conflict in doing things differently in the future. Again, punishment doesn't decrease suffering or help people grow, so it's not what the Culture Committee is interested in. Asking someone to own that they caused harm, offer what they can to repair damage done, and commit to work with the community to prevent the situation from repeating is asking for accountability, which is not just allowed but important. We want to be generous and supportive of each other as we all grow and make mistakes; we also need to be clear about our boundaries and what we expect from folks in our space, in order to keep each other safe.

- Improving the Culture: If you are familiar with the conversations that led many folks focused on "restorative justice" to focusing on "transformative justice," you probably already know where this is going. Since we're influenced by all our social systems and context, and when we're in community we're committed to tending our relationship tangle to maximize joy and sustainability, sometimes solving a problem isn't enough. We need to find the root cause and underlying cultural conditions that contributed to the conflict. If those causes aren't addressed and the harm-tolerating (or celebrating) elements of the culture aren't changed, we'll all be facing the same problem again soon, no matter how hard any individual may try to make sure they aren't directly involved next time. Taking time to consider the community's role and responsibility in a given conflict, the committee might find larger issues that they think need to be addressed within the community, which they can then bring to the Change-up meeting that is attended by all of the learning community members.

Typically someone requests a convening of a Culture Committee by filling out a paper or online Request to Meet form, which gets shared with the Culture Committee members. Typically this form includes fields to describe who was involved, what the conflict entailed, and what kind of support the requester needs. Culture Committee members then work out when to schedule their meeting, have any individual check-in conversations they feel are needed before the group meeting, and put the meeting on the week's schedule. In most cases, members of the community who aren't involved in the conflict and aren't official members of the Culture Committee are encouraged to attend and take part in the conversation so long as they don't distract or derail it. Having a Gameshifting Board and a logbook are particularly helpful for these meetings.

Daily and Weekly Rhythms

Establishing rhythms can help provide comfort and familiarity in an environment with a lot of freedom and divergent interests being explored. The following recommendations are a good starting point for a new ALC:

Daily Cycle

- Morning Meeting: Gather in small groups, often compared to homerooms, at a regular start time to share intentions and coordinate scheduling for the day. Each person (both students and staff) posts their intentions somewhere visible. It's common to use a large whiteboard with a team Kanban, individual Kanbans, or individual areas for checklists and notes. Some ALCs play short relationship-building games during these meetings. Those that take attendance often do so for at least the first part of the day at these meetings, as well.
- Go do the things!
- Lunch: Rather than instituting scheduled times for snacks or lunch, people are encouraged to eat when they are hungry in an ALC. That said, some students (especially younger ones immersed in their play) may need to be reminded to pause and eat, and some groups appreciate an offering for a community lunch on a weekly basis.
- Do more things! Remember to hydrate <3
- Clean-up: At clean-up time, often marked by musical alarms sounding from staff cell phones or other devices, students do personal clean-up of whatever activity they were involved in, then do a community clean-up task before heading to their small group for Afternoon Meeting.
- Afternoon Meeting: Students and staff return to their small groups to update their records for the day and share with each other about what their day included. The focus of this meeting is on sharing and recording; the ALF that's part of the group assists with documentation as needed and usually takes attendance for the second part of the day if that's part of record-keeping for the center.
- Closing Circle: The entire group gathers together to share gratitudes, acknowledgements, accomplishments, or insights. Sometimes this space is calm and focused; sometimes it's silly and playful. Working with young people to design a Gameshifting Board with special options for this meeting can help make it feel personal and special.

Weekly Cycle

- First morning: Before folks head into their Morning Meeting groups, hold a “Set the Week Meeting” to schedule group activities, outings, and events. Usually these activities include the subset of interested folks; rarely, they involve everyone in the school. Review the offerings and opportunities that have been shared by caretakers or volunteers and find out who wants to participate in what. Arrange the schedule and physically post it in a place where it is easy to see, then make sure to have time in the day to digitize it and email it to community members.
- Last morning: Hold a “Change-up Meeting.” Ask learners for feedback about what’s working, not working, what they’d like to see more of, and how they see making those changes by using the Community Mastery Board.
- Last afternoon: Set aside about an hour with no competing activities scheduled which is held as focused time for supporting young folks in documenting creative and longer-form narrative reflections. Learners can write posts, record audio podcasts, or post videos. They often want to include pictures of artwork, stories written, screenshots of video game creations, game scores, descriptions of field trips taken, videos of performances, accomplishment badges or certificates from online educational outlets, and other things that help represent their learning journey. Creating reflections that are in a shareable format is a vital part of the learning cycle and provides critical documentation for caretakers, colleges, or other programs that need to see examples of a young person’s work. If facilitators aren’t needed for videography or taking dictation, their using the time to compose their own sharable reflections from the week can be powerful both as modelling and in generating content that shapes the conversation about your center in the wider community.

In organizing the rhythm of your days and weeks, reserve as much time as possible for the students’ passions and exploration. Do not fill up their schedule with required activities and meetings. Remember that transition time can be stressful for some kids, so having reminders and warnings (“10 minutes until clean up time!”) can help everyone have smoother days. Be ready to advocate for kids whose “listening” body language is active and who haven’t yet forgotten that naps and window-gazing are their own kind of valid (and even productive).

Deschooling

What is deschooling? Well, if schooling is the process of being trained for conformity and self-directed education is the experience of creating the education you want, deschooling is the transition from being the object in training to being the active agent in creating.

Intellectually, we understand that learning is natural and happening all the time. But because so much of our experiences have been formed through the direct association of learning with schooling (and schooling with learning), it's easy to fall back on old assumptions. Most of us grew up immersed in systems that believe children cannot be trusted to make good decisions. We went to schools that limited our choices to a narrow menu of classes, activities, and majors that it was claimed would lead us to "success," or else we were surrounded by media and peers pushing the ideas of such schools into our worlds. As a result, there are times when all of us will struggle to trust that children's choices are valid and authentically reflect their needs as they learn and grow. This is especially true when the child makes a choice we perceive as unproductive. Deconstructing your expectations of a "valid learning experience" and learning to trust children's choices is a vital part of facilitation.

The deschooling experience varies significantly from person to person. However, there are certain patterns and characteristics of the process that are recognizable. Understanding deschooling and how it manifests in facilitators, parents, and young people is key to developing a healthy culture of self-direction at your ALC.

Deschooling in ALFs

If you have experience teaching or working with children in the past, chances are you (or your boss) was the one running the show. Making the transition to facilitating in a self-directed environment can be both liberating and terrifying. Your work will largely be with yourself and your old ways of thinking as you shift from trying to manage the behavior of young people to creating authentic partnerships with them. If you are feeling anxious about the kinds of choices your students are making, ask yourself:

- What skills are being practiced in this activity?
- Which modes of intelligence are being engaged?
- What is this child doing now that they weren't doing last week/last month/at the beginning of the school year?

These questions are also helpful when you're feeling anxious about the kinds of choices you are making...along with the old favorites of "Why am I doing what I'm doing?" and "How is (or isn't) it working?"

Deschooling in Parents

> The greatest challenge is that all members of the Community take ownership of their learning, that parents work on their own processes. That each family takes Self-Directed Learning into their homes. The power to transcend issues of economic contribution and that each family integrates the Community from where they can and want and the understanding that the contribution can be made with work or other resources that are not always financial but are equally valuable. To respond to these challenges we have permanent meetings, we talk about our processes as parents and our learning as a family. In these meetings we practice participatory leadership and empathetic listening. Additionally, we look for courses or texts that help us to continue working on topics such as Non Violent Communication, Agile Families, etc. In our Community each Family contributes what they can and want and we all respect and value each contribution.
>
> Fernanda Buenaño, El Panal, Quito, Ecuador

Supporting parents as they deschool themselves and learn to trust their children is one of the hardest and most important parts of your job as a facilitator.

A parent's motivation for seeking out ALC is usually indicative of what their deschooling process will look like. While some parents have done a lot of research or even spent time in self-directed environments, others may be interested in ALC simply because their child is unhappy in school and they are looking for alternative solutions. The latter is a common scenario, and one that can produce a wide variety of deschooling struggles for the parent in question.

It is very likely that a child who is unhappy with school will be extremely pleased with their newfound freedom in the ALC environment. While there is an immediate improvement in their affect, mood, communication, and general openness, the parent tends to have a bit of a honeymoon experience with the ALC – simply grateful to have the light reappear in their child. During this honeymoon phase, any anxiety the parent may be feeling around the ways in which their child is choosing to spend their time is easily overshadowed by the fact that their kid is suddenly eager to wake up on a Monday morning.

It's usually the second month or about six weeks into the transition that the honeymoon phase ends. The parent has, perhaps, heard their child tell them that they played all day, or worse, their response to the typical afternoon parental inquiry has consistently been, "not much". This is where the parent has their first major challenge in trusting the process, and ultimately trusting their child.

If a parent puts their child in an ALC with the expectation of seeing "X" but instead "PQRY" emerges, they will be constantly disappointed that "X" didn't appear and fail to trust that "PQRY" is what the child really needs. It's your job as a facilitator to help the parent release "X" and see the value of "PQRY."

While being part of an ALC usually means the young person is spending time at the center away from their grown-ups, one of the most consistent pieces of feedback we hear from parents and caretakers is that they transfer from school for their kid's learning and emotional health, but they quickly realize that the time that had been sucked up by stress and struggles over homework, tests, deadlines, and grades is now time they have back for interactions that center their relationship instead. Many parents and caretakers will be coming from school environments where they were treated as obstacles or had to fiercely advocate for their kid with staff who were gatekeepers within big, bureaucratic teams. These parents may need time to figure out sharing space with their kid without the structuring distraction of homework. They may need reassurance that ALC staff see them as collaborators and as whole people, and they may need gentle reminders that a team of 2 that's holding day-to-day operations, administration, and caretaking of the physical space doesn't have the resources to also spend an hour individually coaching them each morning. You care deeply, understand them compassionately as a person, and also expect to be treated as a person yourself, with boundaries around your availability that they need to respect as much as the young people do. Having clear times for family conferences and clear protocols for folks who want to schedule meetings with you at other times, and explaining these in your handbook, gives you an easy place to refer folks back to when needed.

Deschooling in Children

The deschooling process in children is, obviously, related to the amount of time they've spent in other schools and spaces. A 13-year-old who attended traditional school all her life will have a different experience than a 7-year-old who has been exclusively unschooled. There is no formula for how long deschooling takes, nor is there a script for what it looks like. Sometimes, the deschooling experience will involve raucous games and running around; sometimes, it will involve withdrawing to a quiet place to draw, or play Minecraft, or read a book. Kids who come from a culture where mean-spirited teasing, ridiculing, or shaming were rampant are likely to continue these behavior patterns at your ALC while they figure out what cultural norms have power there.

As an ALF, your role in this process is reflective: make explicit the implicit assumptions and motivations that you perceive under the choices the child is making, and the intended and unintended consequences of those choices. It can be difficult for children from traditional settings to even recognize when they are making choices, nevermind feel ownership over them. Keep your observations light and non-judgemental: I notice when you do X, Y happens.

Some Questions to Carry As You Grow

As the community grows and culture becomes more established, it is the role of the facilitator to evolve and grow with it. This means asking yourself, your fellow ALFs, parents, children, and other community members questions like:

- What types of activities/offerings/experiences have happened at our ALC? Are there new experiences that feel healthy, exciting, or inspiring to introduce?
- How have the children individually and as a collective changed? What might we do to change our environment to better serve them now?
- Does our staff reflect the diversity of our community? How do we center the experiences of students of color, queer students, and neurodiverse students?
- What practices do we have that currently feel stale and uninspiring to us?
- How have we, as ALFs, changed, and what does that mean for our community?
- What are we doing for children that they now can do for themselves?
- What have we not been doing for children that we now see they need support with?

Volunteers and Visitors

Part of what makes a rich learning environment is having passionate adults that are excited about things and willing to share them with kids. Visitors can be ready audiences for young folks who like to practice answering questions and leading tours around your space. Mentoring interns can offer young people an example of another actively learning adult to engage with and learn from, while also providing facilitators who are grateful for the mentorship they received to pass on what they learned. It can be fun, exciting, and enriching for everyone to welcome folks from beyond your immediate community to come visit or volunteer.

However, in today’s world there are some common-sense steps to take to safeguard your environment and yourselves.

Validate Identity: We have volunteers complete a web-based form with complete contact information (full name, phone, etc.). We also have a checkbox on that form where they agree to authorize us to do a criminal background check on them. When they come into the school for the first time, we make a copy of their ID to keep on file.

Background Checks: Once you have authorization and identifying information for doing a background check, then obviously you can do one right away. It's important to get this authorization even if you don't immediately use it, like if you choose to complete a few rounds of interviews first so you aren't needing to run checks on folks who aren't actually going to make it through the rest of your process and into your space. Requiring the authorization on the initial application may also deter people with predatory intentions from applying.

Requirements and Agreements: Some states and locales have laws against some people, particularly those with specific kinds of criminal histories, working with or being responsible for children. You'll want to check the specifics of your local laws. In any case, most parents and caretakers would likely be uncomfortable with people with past violent or sexual offences working with their children. You'll need to define your own policies in this domain. Just remember, that having everybody feel safe is a vital part of creating a healthy culture in the school. Sometimes that even means there are fear-mongering parents that are not a fit because their extreme fears breed a culture of paranoia. Set some clear boundaries that you can honor.

You also have a responsibility to avoid putting employee burdens, such as being the sole adult supervising a park trip, on non-employees. This is because labor exploitation isn't cool, they won't have the training and team support your staff do, and families didn't give consent for them to be responsible for their kids...that's your facilitators' role. They may be very competent and even be willing, but you don't want that liability or to be the model that normalizes taking advantage of workers – and of treating a worker's willingness to be taken advantage of as the metric for measuring their dedication to a mission – for your watching students.

Community Agreements apply to everyone, but not all adults will understand that without it being made explicit. Establishing a culture of integrity where people keep their agreements is important, whether those people are staff, students, or volunteers and visitors. Be sure to make the agreements you're asking people to follow very clear. Will they be in 2 days a week? Tuesday/Thursday mornings? What time? How long? Is any preparation expected? Visitors can be light and fun, or they can require a lot of staff energy if they have tons of

questions for the adults or schoolish ways of interacting with young people...What is your facilitators' process for deciding what kinds of visits are worth saying "yes" to and which would-be visitors they'll direct to their next info session instead? Volunteers and interns will require more investment, and also are more likely to offer a more reciprocal exchange. What kind of support can you set them up with? Do they need check-ins with a supervisor or an official letter they can turn in for course credit? It's worth getting these kinds of things clear early for managing everyone's expectations.

Season Changes and Maintenance Work



Facilitating Community Building

Both in the beginning and periodically as turnover in the community leads to seasons of resetting, cohering the various individuals gathered around your ALC into a community will take deliberate and patient work. While ultimately a parent will put their kid's interests over those of the community and a family will be unlikely to continue showing up to events once their students have moved on (although it sometimes does happen), for the time when folks are part of your project together, they are as much your project as you and the young people are. Unlike conventional schools that position families as nuisances, opposition, or faceless sources of income, ALCs are social ecosystems that understand each of us – including

young people – are shaped and sustained by different social systems. We collaborate with young people, and we also collaborate with their grown ups in trying to figure out how to best support them. Sometimes this means advocating for a kid to their grown up or working with a grown up to try to find the best resources for their kid, but there needs to be a relationship of alignment and recognizing each other as full people for the collaboration to be as fruitful as it can be. Relationships as whole, complex people will also be helpful when collaborating as members of a working group, especially when tricky or sensitive topics need addressing. Tending relationships between facilitators and caretakers mostly looks like showing care in small and regular communications and holding time for longer check-ins 2-3 times a year. But playing and having projects to work on together also helps. For kids to have as wide a variety of supportive adults on their team as possible, and for the adults to be able to self-organize in support of each other so they can better show up for their kids and not be putting impossible expectations on facilitators, they also need relationships to each other that are safe and strong enough to hold some weight. How to build those? Play, collaboration...and regular appreciation.

Like plants and people, relationships can't be forced to grow; they develop as they will in their own time. What you can do is optimize conditions then tend the ecosystem until it finds its own homeostasis. How? Open an opportunity for connection and then facilitate the flow....again and again and again and again. You want to invite people to specific happenings, so they have a focus and an easy conversation topic, where there's also open space and a pretty good chance they leave feeling both satisfied and like they belong. Can you have a potluck before a work group meeting? A karaoke or board game night? A family field trip that you plan with kids and let them lead it? Even a space cleaning day followed by some kind of treat, as mentioned in a previous chapter, can seed new friendships. Many people develop new bonds by playing and laughing together, but some find collaborating to sort Lego and repaint a hallway just as rich. Having lots of different kinds of opportunities opens space for folks who won't be anywhere near laser tag or a beach trip still show up for some mini golf or to share their BBQ skills. In time, a Community Building working group will pick up these initiatives and start to plan and run some of them so you don't have to. If you notice there's potential for a work group, but people don't seem to be self-organizing, they may need a blueprint and some hand holding...or your reassurance that this isn't the kind of project where your founding team will get jealous and resentful of others trying to take leadership. Offer the invitation, reassurance, first step suggestions, and see what happens! One way to do this that often moves people from hesitant to enthusiastic action is for whoever on staff has been hosting community events on top of facilitating and their other tasks to approach a couple community adults who have been consistently engaging and

present the invitation as a request for help, either taking the event planning off your plate or brainstorming with you who else might be able to. If the handover goes smoothly – and even if it turns out it's a practice attempt that brings you more lessons than relief – it's a mutually beneficial adventure for everyone.

A note that, much as we say that "Children are People," adults are people, too. The same practices of setting agreements, using Gameshifting Boards and agendas, and having a clear conflict resolution process can be as important for adults as for during the day at your center with young people. Sometimes, the extra protocols and supportive tools are more important with adults, who often have decades of unhelpful patterns to deschool from. They may also be more in need of appreciation and expressions of gratitude than their young people. It's good practice to appreciate everyone, but while you've hopefully been working with the kids to ensure you can all swim in a grateful culture while you're together each day, their grown-ups' work environments are likely not so affirming. While being disingenuous isn't a good look, it doesn't hurt to offer folks the flowers we can as we can.

Fundraising

While some ALCs have a community member who can write grant applications for them, manage subletting their space for events in the evenings and breaks, or have space for running co-working spaces and cafes in parallel with their regular programming, most of us depend on fundraisers when our regular income is unsteady.

Sometimes you'll have an urgent need, so your fundraising working group will rally the community to make plans in response. Big crowdfunding campaigns, especially if you can find someone to put money up for a matching campaign, are usually the go-to in these cases. If needed, they can be supplemented by events and smaller fundraisers that you're equipped to pull off with a short turnaround time. Sometimes you'll decide it'd be nice to take an all-school day trip to another city if you can raise the funds without it being too stressful, so you plan with hope but not attachment or pressure. You host a bake sale, put some designs on shirts folks can order through an online print-on-demand platform, table at a craft fair selling candles and screenprints, host an open mic comedy show or a board games and pizza night. Maybe you sell calendars or portraits. Maybe you offer some workshops and open play sessions at a local park. You can do all kinds of things and just see what works. If you keep good notes, you can make more strategic decisions about what kind of fundraiser to run when the money is more of a need than a want.

Much of the time, though, you just know there is always someone needing scholarship funds and extra art supplies, so you build fundraising into your annual rhythm and turn the events into community traditions folks can plan around. One way this could look is opening the academic year with an event at a restaurant that gives a portion of sales for the evening back to your ALC, running an online giving campaign and some cute merchandise or craft sales heading into the holidays, co-planning a small community event with the kids in February, then planning a big event in April or May followed by trainings or camps for June or July (if that's when your "summer vacation" or equivalent break is). Having a rhythm means folks will plan around your Back To School Dinner or Spring Silent Auction. It also means you can keep a notebook detailing how you plan and run each event each year, which should make the planning easy after about 3 years refinement and which will allow for people to pass on planning roles without having to start from scratch with each change.

While the timing, format, and execution of your fundraisers matters, the one element to focus on to make the biggest difference is your ask. People give to people. People give where they feel emotionally invested in someone's story. People give where they feel their giving will make a significant difference in someone's life. Occasionally someone decides that an initiative – like self-directed education – is what they want for the future so they'll look for a handful of well-established related projects to make large donations to. If that happens and they pick you, congratulations! Most of the time, though, you're going to have to get people's attention, tell them a story that gets them emotionally invested and confident you're doing life-changing work, illustrate how a concrete sum would allow for specific moves to broaden or deepen your impact, and then tell them who they can write the check out to or where you'll post their name with the "thank you" announcement for digital donations made at the link popping up in their event app right now. Then do make sure to follow up with thanks and a cute story from your center.



lovely facilitators rocking "ALC" logo shirts at a training

Marketing And Base Building

Share from Personal Experience: The most compelling thing you can share is how ALCs have directly impacted you or your child(ren). Take some time to think of the biggest differences that have come from being in (or having your children in) a self-directed learning environment with a powerful, participatory culture. Clarify for yourself why you think they're important, and why they would not have happened in a traditional setting.

Target Audience(s)

There's no such thing as an effective and generic marketing campaign. If your message is too generalized, there is very little chance of it being effective with anyone. What makes a marketing message powerful is that it moves its intended audience.

You will have a hard time making your message move the people you want to move if you haven't actually taken the time to figure out who they are and what they need. Your message

is going to have to speak to their needs, their wants, their motivations, or their fears.

Before you do ANY marketing action (whether planning an event, choosing keywords for an online ad, or writing a press release) you need to ask these questions:

- Which audience(s) are we targeting?
- Is this channel an effective way to reach that audience?
- How do we tailor our message to move them?
- What clear call to action can we make?

You are not going to have the kind of old-school multi-billion dollar advertising budget to lodge your brand name in people's consciousness seven times so they start to think you're legit. Each of your marketing campaigns will want to include a clear action (come to this event, visit our web site, email us here, enroll now we only have two openings left, etc.)

Get the Word Out

Referrals, Gossip, & Creating a Buzz

Realistically, most of your students will come from referrals. Let's say that another way… Chances are good that there is no magical advertisement, newspaper article, or community event that is going to generate a landslide of student enrollments. Most of your students are going to come in from word of mouth referrals by people in your community talking about the school. Even if you get a bunch of prospects from an event or article, your conversion rate of prospects to students will tend to be higher from personal referrals.

That means this is your most important marketing channel.

That's why we're putting it first and we're writing the most about it. We want you to know how to make referrals as reliable and effective as possible. It's free. It's scalable. It's authentic. It's powerful. And if you learn to leverage referrals, you may not need to do many other marketing campaigns (once you've gotten your community up and running.)

The problem is that most organizations think referrals are random and outside their sphere of influence. Or even worse, when they try to influence referrals they make the mistake of bribing the people making the referral, which can produce the opposite effect and have people not talk about your school, because they don't want their friends to think they're doing it for a sales commission.

You can't (or shouldn't) make people talk about you, but you certainly can establish conditions to multiply the chances that they're going to, and help them feel confident you'll take good care of anyone they send your way. These are some keys to boosting your referrals*:

1. Novelty: Are you providing something new and/or exciting? People don't talk much about old news. For families that have been involved with your center for a while, you probably need to keep providing news which is tailored to support them in having novel things to talk about: big accomplishments that came out of recent student projects, the music studio you just built, the 3-D printer you got, etc. This isn't about flooding people with flashiness or feeding the assumption that kids have to produce a thing adults can brag to each other about for them to be learning anything of worth. Don't do those things. This is about celebrating out loud, continuing to connect your ALC to different disciplines and topics so families have templates to use, and framing self-directed education as a practice that isn't new itself but nevertheless stays relevant as a response to new social challenges.
2. Utility: Are you providing something vitally useful? People generally won't tell someone about something they don't think will be useful to them. Part of this should be easy, because most people consider an education to be very useful. So you'll want ways to demonstrate that this type of education is useful – ideally more useful than the typical approach.
3. Dependability: Do you reliably deliver a good experience? If people think it's going to be hit or miss whether someone will have a good experience, they often won't talk about you because they don't want to be blamed for a bad encounter...or they'll warn people to stay away. Families must first have a great "customer care" experience through the admissions process. Communications are returned promptly. They feel welcome. Next steps are clear and easy to navigate. The outcome is clear and understandable, especially if they don't become a student. Then, they and their child must have good experience of "the product" itself, like a positive experience at a guest event, an inspiring visiting week, and finally an experience of felt care and belonging if they enroll. If you're not managing your leads and communications, you're almost certainly going to drop the ball in customer care a lot. If you are unreliable in any of these domains, you damage your community's ability to make referrals on your behalf.
4. Economy: Are you providing good value? Having a sliding scale tuition can really help with this one, but obviously some families are challenged to pay any tuition at all. Demonstrating to your community that you're committed to keep tuitions affordable, your expenses lean, and your budgeting inclusive helps build faith in the affordability of

what you’re providing. It can also be useful to specifically tell people things like “ALC NYC tuition is about half the average Manhattan private school tuition according the Wall Street Journal.” Providing people with empowering contexts for the affordability of what you’re doing helps them feel good about the costs of participating.

(*Note: the framework for this section is borrowed from Embracing the N.U.D.E. Model by Scott Degraffenreid and Donna Blandford.)

Follow-up with the Referrer is Vital: Finally, after receiving a referral you should thank the person who sent them to you. And then, no matter what stage of the process the prospect makes it to, you should let the referrer know the outcome and how they were taken care of. This follow up is key part of ensuring the experience of dependability and makes them more likely to do it again.

Once again, having a clear way of tracking your prospects through all the stages of your admissions process is vital to having referrals work. Do it!

Social Media

Building a following on social media takes work and dedication, as discussed back at the beginning of this document.. That said, well-tended and leveraged social media accounts can be powerful. Educate, agitate, organize, and make ditching institutional mass schooling for self-directed education irresistible. Getting folks emotionally invested in your project, whether they live close enough to consider enrolling or volunteering or not, by inviting them into your story as it unfolds can end up moving worlds when you inspire them to start a partner center that hosts exchanges with yours or to rally their friends to donate to your emergency fundraising event when you have to move. People can be pretty amazing in how they show up for each other, especially when they feel like they can make a difference for people or a project they care about.

Hosting Events

Hosting events often seems like a good idea, and it certainly can be, but it also takes a lot of work to make them good. It’s hard to make a very good impression when you have poor attendance, are disorganized or unprepared, have chosen a bad venue, run around frantic and stressed, or fail to engage attendees powerfully. Remember the second root of the Agile Tree is about people’s experience of HOW things went will overshadow WHAT you wanted to

tell them. If you're going to host an event, then do the work to have it be great. You can design great events that don't take too much work, but it takes a little practice and grace to have that happen.

Before EVERY event: First, have a way for people to RSVP, then follow up with people who have sent in an RSVP with reminders to come (by phone, email or both). Have a sign-in station at the entrance of the event. Provide name tags for guests, have hosts wear name tags, and practice using people's names. Welcome people and make sure they know where to go and what the plan is. Ideally, have your more outgoing students involved in greeting people. Keep a couple hours immediately preceding the event clear so you aren't late or harried with last minute scrambling.

At the Every Event: Provide a clear call to action. If your event was a good time, then you've probably established relationship, connection, understanding, and trust with your guests... which means you're in a critical moment to invite them to act. Sit them down to schedule a visiting week and have them promise to complete the online application by a certain time (or hand them a paper one to complete on the spot). Pass a sheet for newsletter sign-ups. Invite people to volunteer at the school. Make sure there is a clear next step for each person who is ready to take one. If you don't, then as their warm fuzzy energy quickly dissipates, your event will just be a vague memory.

Introductions: If you host basic events that are introductions to your Agile Learning Center (whether you call it an Open House, a Meet and Greet, or whatever), be sure to use your tools to make it adaptive, inclusive and participatory. For example, one great way to do this is to use a group kanban board to manage the agenda. Ask people to introduce themselves and to share what inspired them to come and one or two primary questions they have. While they share their questions, facilitators write them on sticky notes. When introductions are complete, put all those sticky notes in the backlog to show them how they just created the agenda. Then you know exactly how to keep the conversation relevant, how to make sure everybody's main concerns are addressed, and who to address which conversations to. When currently enrolled young people and their adults are enthusiastic to come answer questions at these events, attendees always appreciate being able to ask their questions of community members with different roles and experiences.

Partner Events: One of the challenges in organizing a good event can be having a lot of new prospects to engage with. One easy way to accomplish that is to co-host an event with a partner organization. This is especially valuable if your ALC and the partner organization have plans to work together, or enough complimentary overlap of purpose. A local library,

pop-up adventure playground group, or neighborhood art space might be down to co-host an event with you, and the interdisciplinary offering will both broaden your reach and increase the novelty of the experience for folks.

Appearances, Interviews, & Features

Can you schedule speaking gigs in local Agile Meetups or Makerspaces? Do you have access to Radio/TV people who can interview you? Can you find relevant Internet podcasts to be a guest speaker on? Do you have access to people who can write articles about the school (magazine, newspaper, educational blogs, etc)? Can you write your own article and post it somewhere that needs interesting content?

Press Releases

Press releases, almost by design, tend to be pretty lifeless and boring. You can write them if you want, but unless you have a powerful distribution mechanism to get them to numerous media organizations as well as something really newsworthy or exciting to invite people to, you're probably not going to produce a lot of prospects this way. You might pique the interest of a journalist, but you could do that better by directly contacting journalists who write about relevant issues.

Paid Advertising

We would recommend NOT paying for advertising until you've gotten skilled at delivering your message in very brief ways to your main target audiences. Because no matter how good a particular advertising channel might be at putting something in front of your audience's eyes, if you don't have effective ad copy/images/appeal, you won't be able to convert those eyeballs to active prospects. You'll only waste money unless you can create effective ads.

Traditional Advertising

Print newspapers, magazines, TV, Radio, mailers… these things all exist, and they're all still fairly poor at converting eyeballs to customers in most contexts. Once you incorporate your project, you will probably start receiving calls from local family and parenting magazines or other media who try to sell you ads. It'll be rare that this is actually worth the investment on your part. Consider your local landscape and where your target audience spends their attention.

Targeted Internet Age Advertising

School/Youth Program Directories: We've had mixed success with these. We've received some prospects and inquiries. Check services to see how much web traffic a site receives, and guess what percentage of that traffic would be looking for your kinds of alternative schooling. We have had people try to sell us listing on their school directories who received less web traffic than we already received.

Neighborhood Directories/Websites: Some places have very active local websites that people use for finding out about local events and resources. These can be a good place to post articles and information about your school, or even pay for ads or a listing in a local school directory. You really need to gauge the cost with the amount of traffic you think it can generate for you.

Google Adwords: Adwords lets you show up as a featured listing based on matching searches for particular keywords in your local area. Almost everybody uses Google to look for things, including local alternative schools. You pay a particular price per-click. In big cities with lots of competition, this can be quite expensive, in smaller areas it can be somewhat affordable. Make sure your ads link to a landing page with content directly relevant to what your ad said (see below for more info).

Social Media Advertising: Most social media sites offer a couple of options for advertising on their platforms. You can "boost posts" on your pages, like announcements for events. Or you can display ads which can target people with very specific demographics (e.g. single professional mothers between the ages of 35 and 45 with interests in X, Y, or Z). Such mircotargeting is enabled through surveillance and data-harvesting that you may actually have ethical concerns about and not want to be involved in creating a market for; weigh the pros and cons carefuly. If you're really clear about who you want to target, using social media platforms they're on, whether you utilize mircotargeted ads or not, can certainly be an effective way of reaching those very specific people. Make sure your ads link to a landing page with content directly relevant to what your ad said (see below for more info).

Important Note about Landing Pages: If you post an ad about "No More Homework" or "Makerspace School" or "Adventure Schooling" then you better be sure that the page they end up on actually talks about the thing you were advertising. This "Landing Page" is almost a requirement for Google Ads and highly recommended for any ad. Have a few paragraphs of text which specifically addresses the issue they came for, maybe a video about the school, and then general information, and then a call to action (like apply to our school,

RSVP for this event, or at least sign up for our newsletter). Your ad investment will be wasted if a visitor feels like you are not about the thing they came there for.

Track of Leads and Conversions: Use your prospect tracking tools to help you keep track of where leads came from, and how far those leads make it through your enrollment process. Do you get web visitors, but no RSVPs for events? Do they RSVP for an event and never come? Do they come and find out it's a bad fit and never apply? This can tell you a lot about where you want to keep putting time, energy and money into generating leads in the future.

Better Than Breadcrumbs

As you run your ALC, you'll collect many things: letters, emails, stacks of paperwork, Culture Committee logs, 1000s of field trip photos, leftover soap and buttons from that one fundraiser, sticky notes, grey hairs, traditions for celebrating made-up holidays...the traces of the work build up.

Whatever your process for regularly clearing out your clutter and organizing what remains, there are some artifacts that future you will be grateful for if present you curates and keeps them now. Notebooks and sketchbooks from your first years facilitating can be both interesting to look back on, and they can be useful for when you're trying to support a new facilitator but have forgotten what your first months were like. Keeping a few photos from each year as the littlest cohort turns into teenagers – and the cycle continues – can make for a fun afternoon of showing the big kids their smaller selves and seeing what they remember. Annual Review documents and videos can be generated for kids and parents at the end of each term, and posting them on your website over time will create quite a retrospective to help you and potential funders or families piece together the story of how far you've come. Finally, whether you keep your glimmers and love notes in a folder or a jar, they're as much a gift for 10-years-from-now you as for rainy-cloudy-day you. Maybe tuck one from you to your future self in there every once in a while...Right now, even, if you're feeling inspired!

Back to the Beginning: Why an ALC?

> Movements are born of critical connections rather than critical mass.
>
> Grace Lee Boggs

> We decided to make our SDE space and ALC because we loved the idea of being rooted and connected to something bigger than ourselves. I knew I wanted to hold space and give back to a community that I was benefiting so much from, but it was intimidating to figure out how to plug in, on top of what felt like a daunting task of adding one more to-do item to the ever growing list you have as a school director. I landed on "I'll just show up" to the ALF calls and I'll listen. This "showing up" to ALF calls has been a steady practice of mine for 5 years now and I would highly suggest it! Getting to be a facilitator at an SDE school is an insulated experience which can at times make it feel isolating. When you get the opportunity to chat with others from across the globe about this shared experience it instead becomes enriching. You get to share your highs and lows with some of the only people that fully understand the magic that is self-directed. I have learned so many techniques and skills from other facilitators sharing about their day-to-days. It also is just a time for friendship, I look forward to logging on to a network call hearing from my global friends and continuing our conversations. It isn't a business call but a shared human experience call that I always walk away from feeling more excited about my ALF practice. I'm glad that I gave the advice to myself that I give to kids- you don't have to be an expert you can simply just be present! This is how I started with my support call practice and now I have genuine life-long relationships with people all over the world doing this thing we call ALF'ing.
>
> Amber Sawyer, co-founder and facilitator, Rivers and Roads ALC, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, US

There are plenty of people who decide that unschooling and developing friendships with other unschoolers more than meets their needs. They find socialization, inspiration, and support through online communities; they find all that and more by connecting with people who live close enough to share dinners and babysitting with. This can be a fulfilling way to practice self-directed education. After all, we're talking about self-directing in a world of relationships and opportunities, not solitary self-teaching in isolation. Even learners outside organized groups and centers have abundant invitations and possibilities available to them. For these folks, joining an ALC nearby may or may not make sense. Reading through our

online resources and attending our events may or may not be helpful. They'll self-direct based on the needs of their families – taking what works and leaving the rest – and they'll likely decide starting an ALC isn't worth the work.

There are also people who reflect and realize they mostly want a learning center for their kids, and there are kids who decide they want a center for themselves and their friends. They want the dedicated space, the shared resources, the visits from other self-directed education folks, and the experience of community organizing. They know, though, that when the folks they're starting the center for grow out of interest in it, they'll be ready to move on, too. In some cases, these folks will start their center knowing they will dissolve it or hand it on in a semi-set number of years. This foresight and ability to be honest about their priorities will let them intentionally grow the community in ways that facilitate a smooth transition when the time comes. They may again decide an ALC is too much work, that they'll copy what works for them and keep doing their own thing. Alternatively, they may decide having ALC templates and tools, opportunities for connection and exchanges, and a pool of experienced facilitators to potentially support their center once they themselves move on sounds like a joy and a relief.

So why do the people who start ALCs start ALCs? Because, with a nod to the inimitable Octavia Butler, they want to shape change. They want to be in relationship with young people in ways that affirm their shared humanity, relationships of care, celebration, and creativity rather than extraction, coercion, and alienation. They want memories of their precious, fleeting years to include more laughter and cooking together than fighting over a grade that won't matter in ten years (or even in 10 weeks). They see possible futures where the unlearning and healing work of deschooling is unknown to youth who grew up with their needs met, feelings validated, self-expression celebrated, gifts nurtured, and agency respected. They wonder what it could be like to live in a world where many worlds fit and flourish, where social spaces are organized for equity and education, where we encourage and hold space for each other to fully develop and offer our talents to the world. They dream, decide, and start building those new worlds by practicing for them here in the shell of the old ones. Movement makers call this prefiguration. They start where they are with what's at hand, and they connect with the network to draw from collective wisdom, contribute to a change-making movement, and find friends to inspire and dream with across oceans and decades. Together we're capable of so much more than any of us are on our own.

The Requirements and Promises of the ALC Network

Each ALC project is independent and unique, and the ALC Network in practice is the ecosystem of people in ALC projects who are committed to tending our relationships and collectively transforming education to transform the world.

To become a member of the ALC Network, which is organized legally as a 501c3 education nonprofit based in the United States, projects need to commit to operating in alignment with our philosophy and principles. Project members also commit to keeping all community agreements and to make an annual financial contribution to the upkeep of the network.

While the details of what the network offers change based on community needs and offerings, initiatives focus on building relationships between ALCs, gathering and sharing resources that support ALC projects doing what they do, and broadcasting movement stories that influence the broader self-directed education movement while expanding popular imagination of what's possible. Most conversations, calls, and project work groups are hosted by and for network members. At the same time, we've set membership payment amounts on a sliding scale, expanded membership invitations to include supportive individuals and parallel projects that want to officially align with us, and prioritized translation of our main materials, like this Starter Kit, in an attempt to make membership accessible to more folks.

What Do We Mean By "Open Source"?

It was a deliberate choice to make so many of our guides, tools, and resources available online for free, with clear invitations and encouragement to adapt them in any way that serves your context without compromising philosophical alignment. We aren't a franchise, with inspections and certifications. We strive to minimize paywalls and other barriers to engagement. We're clear on our non-negotiables and our process for addressing conflicts that arise, but generally we try to engage with trust in people and curiosity about invitations to change. We're more excited about the opportunities that generosity creates than we are afraid of the possibility that someone will use our work in ways that's counter to our mission...Hopefully if we're clear enough about our commitment to youth liberation and community-building, any coercive and homogenizing project that tries to call itself an ALC will be met with questions as its potential supporters explore the freely available information about what ALCs actually are about.

Connecting With Other ALCs



gathering in Mexico for AAGIL 2019

While network membership offers some passive benefits – use of logo graphics, form templates, access to the facilitator Slack team where you can be a lurker and learn lots – community is most fruitful and fulfilling when you engage with it. There are lots of ways to show up in relationship or to call others to show up in relationship with you. You can contact other ALCs about visits and collaborating on events. You can show up to their events and invite them to yours. You can join facilitator calls, contribute to conversations on Slack, or offer to host online calls and game sessions. Start or join a book club. Send postcards or care packages. Follow each other on social media and engage with each other's posts.

If exchanges and calls lead to friendships between folks at your centers, tending the relationship will still take work but it'll be easier than if you've just got two administrators trying to arrange an abstract organizational partnership. Start with people and try to play

together, then keep showing up. Having strong relationships to multiply delight in the good times and offer solidarity through times of crisis can make a huge difference in how people experience and carry on their organizing work.

Network Work

We've already mentioned some ways that folks in ALC Network member projects create and care for the network ecosystem. Sharing the work we're doing on the ground, engaging with other facilitators and projects, answering questions on Slack, welcoming visitors, hosting calls and events, moderating comment threads and forums, translating materials, and offering your talents to the group as well as to your local center are just some of the ways that ALC folks do network work. As in a center, if you're eager to get more involved, you can join or propose a working group, either for a domain – like tech management or fundraising – or for a project – like the rewriting and translation of this Starter Kit. You don't need any kind of formal permission; just get clear on what you want to make exist and then go!

If you're thinking bigger, there are many models for creating social change that can help you brainstorm where you want to focus your movement-moving efforts. Maybe you want to change institutions where you are, so you focus on policy-related work, organizing with conventional school teachers, or setting up pilot programs in university settings. Maybe you want to create replacements, so you find ways to make your ALC project available to more people, make offerings in public parks and at local libraries, and support other folks who want to start co-ops and centers on the first steps of their journeys. Finally, maybe you want to focus on sparking personal transformation, inspiring others to deschool and start practicing self-directed education. You can do this through storytelling, hosting "intro to self-directed education" meet-ups, and generally finding ways to be available to accompany folks. Whether your organizing dreams are colossal or small, remember even the smallest efforts can have unseen ripple effects. If you've got a team and energy for an international conference, yay! If running your center has you wanting to contribute more but too tired to make any but the lightest offering, a weekly potluck or monthly newsletter requires less from you while still definitely seeding change. You can always iterate if reflecting after a few cycles leads you to wanting something different.

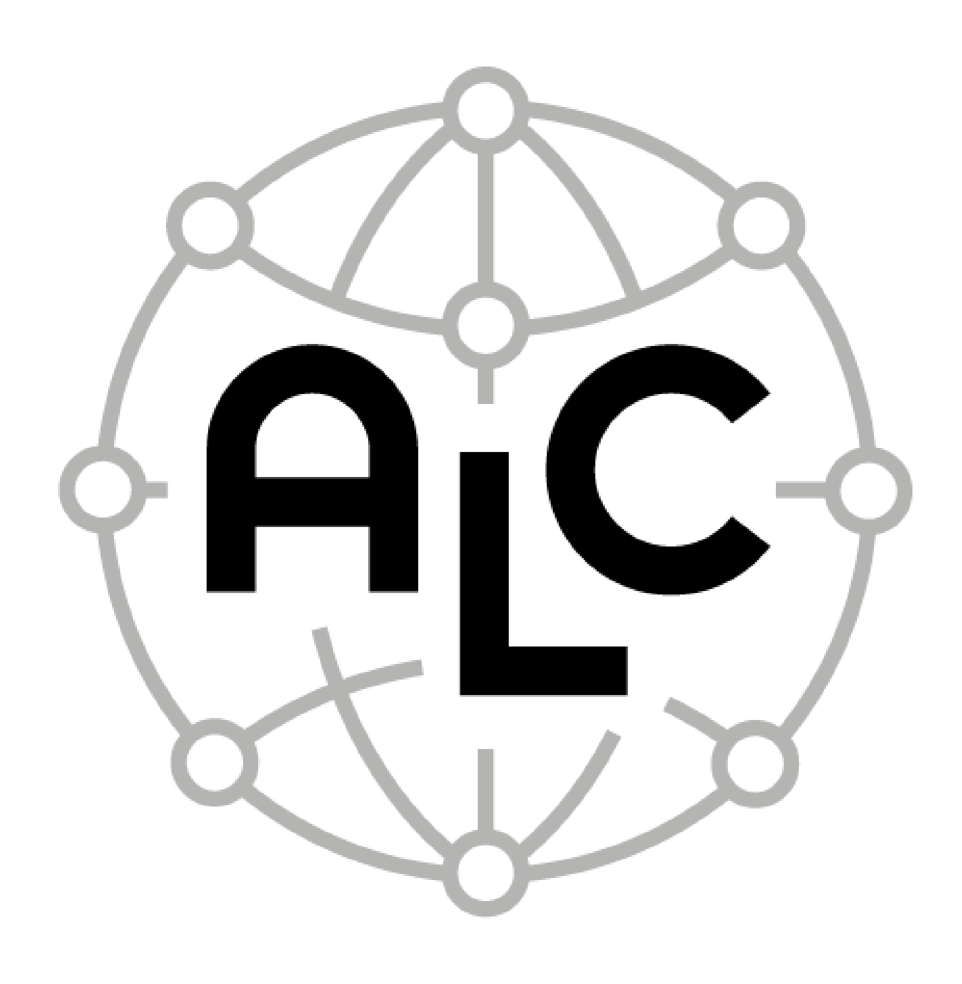
Infinite Play

At the time of this writing, a handful of teenagers at the New York City Agile Learning Center are very interested tarot cards. Some find the framework helpful as they try to make sense of

their shifting worlds. Some use readings as openings to be vulnerable and uncertain with each other. Some like to hang out with the tarot-reading kids and understand what they're talking about, sort of. And some are fascinated by the use of art and symbols.

One symbol they mention a lot is "the fool." This character is at the end and the start silmultaniously, not certain but also not uneasy. Where is their journey going? What will happen next? Who knows! They're present, open, curious, and set to learn where they're going as they get there. Those of us who read more koans than cards may recognize an echo of the concept of Beginner's Mind.

You've arrived at the end of this Starter Kit! This moment is an end, a beginning, a mid-point, a prelude...and maybe it's all of them at once. Hopefully you have found some enjoyable lessons and some useful lessons as you've explored this offering of ours. It'll keep evolving, your adventure will keep unfolding, and maybe between this reading and the publication of the next edition of this Kit you'll become the kind of facilitator who is unfazed by messy art projects and sagely amused by the perpetual "but what about math?!" Maybe you'll send photos and suggestions to the editing team. Maybe you'll join the editing team! Who knows. Only one way to find out...


ALC

Appendix I: Highlights of Center Reflections from the 2021 ALC Network Annual Report

Full report available at https://app.gitbook.com/@nycagile/s/network2020report/

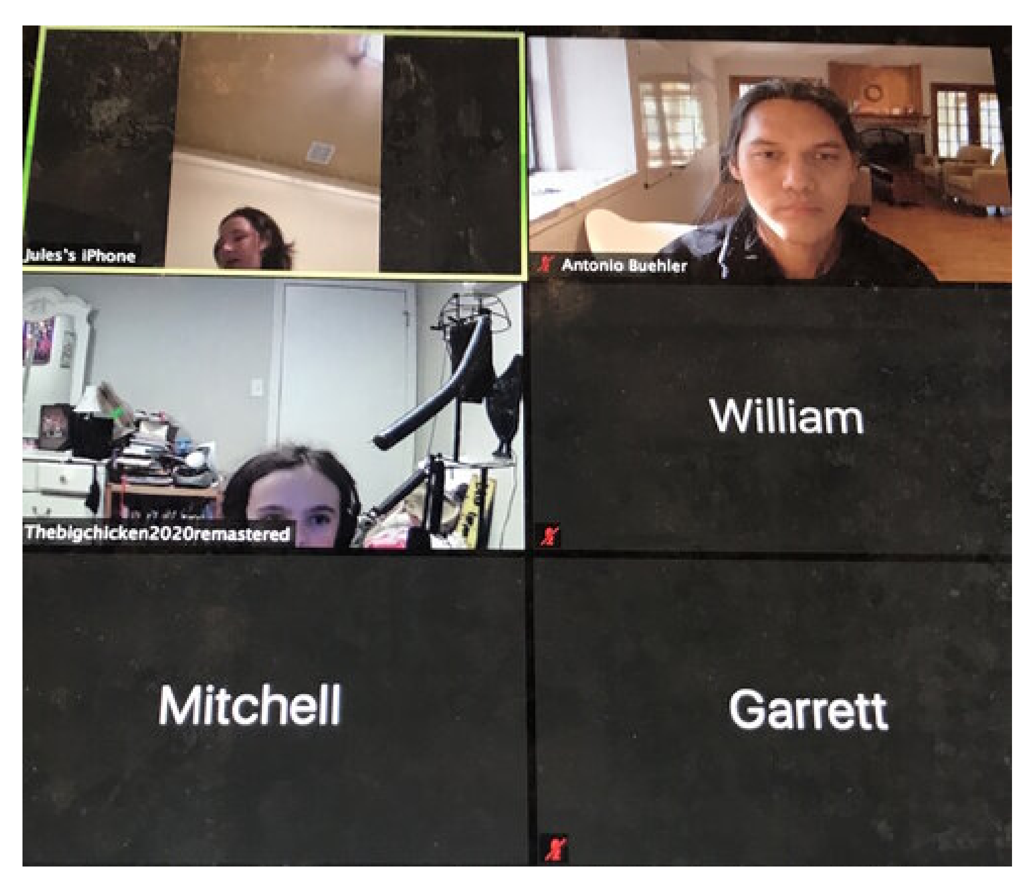
Abrome: Austin, Texas, USA

Facilitators at Abrome have kept a detailed daily blog at https://www.abrome.com/blog as they've transitioned to running mostly outdoor programming for the 2020-2021 school year.

They also have a comprehensive Covid-19 plan at https://www.abrome.com/covid-19

Below is a post of theirs from founder and facilitator Antonio Buehler, who also hosted our ALC Network spring webinar sessions on schedule co-creation and college admissions. Before covid arrived in Texas, he did this interview with Akilah Richards on his journey to self-directed education (and love of libraries): https://raisingfreepeople.com/145/

December 5, 2020



Morning meeting for the remote cell

Thursday morning was a challenging one for me as I woke up still exhausted from the day before. Fortunately I didn't have any driving around to do before the morning meeting like I did the day before. After spending a little too much time updating myself on what happened since I unplugged the night before, I brewed a pot of coffee and settled in for some writing. At 10 a.m. it was time for the morning meeting, so I logged onto Zoom and waited for the Learners to show. Each of them did. That morning we talked about who (other than our guardians) has had the biggest impact or influence on each of our lives: grandmother, aunt, brother (twice), therapist, me (honored), middle school teacher, and three friends. Then we talked about the non-person (e.g., incidents, pets, institutions) that has had the biggest impact or influence on each of our lives: pet dog (twice), Georgia Aquarium, arctic bumblebee, computer ("where I met a lot of friends and had a lot of fun"), the pandemic (not a good thing), and the Austin Police Department (also not a good thing). We finished up the call with each person identifying the practice they would focus on for the day, and then we adjourned the meeting.

After the morning meeting I moved into a check-in with one of the Learners. I had scheduled a weekly check-in with each Learner in the remote cell so that we could have some dedicated time chatting to each other. My meeting with the Learner was a relatively short one, but I did get to ask him about his interest in the arctic bumble bee. He told me the particular arctic

bumblebee he was interested in was *Bombus polaris*, and he said that he learned about it while research arctic poppies, which the arctic butterfly pollinates. He told me how it survives in cold climates. While fascinating, I found the other arctic bumblebee, *Bombus hyperboreus* more interesting and far more disturbing. It enslaves other bee colonies because they do not have the ability to produce workers.



Being their best mountain goat selves

Meanwhile, the in-person cell also had everyone present. Facilitator Lauren said they had a different energy on day two of the cycle. They prior day they were all about socializing, but on Thursday they were all about socializing *and* exploring the unfamiliar place they would spend their day. Like the day before, the cliffs called them like a Siren, and the spent much of their day free climbing the wall or exploring around it. The Facilitators later said that some of the Learners had overestimated their climbing abilities, and those Learners soon discovered that just because it is easy to get up to a spot on the face of a rock wall does not mean it will be easy to get down. Those types of experiences tend to create some enduring lessons.

Three of the Learners decided to break away from the group and hiked downhill toward a bridge while everyone else walked up toward a rocky area. The former group, consisting of the older Learners, investigated a cave and socialized. Eventually they came back and rejoined the rest of the cell. The older Learners found Facilitator Ariel was hanging out with one of the younger Learners and the prospective Learner who was shadowing, and together

they began to use the rocks that were all around as their medium for art. They created designs with the rocks by lining them up, and then they began constructing some impressive cairns. They even produced what I call fractal cairns, a cairn that is composed of multiple smaller cairns.

On Wednesday, for the first time in ages, I made an agreement to sit down and play Roblox with a Learner, and the time we set to do so was at 1 p.m. on Thursday. While I am no fan of video games myself, I know that they are a big deal to many of the Learners, so it makes sense that I spend some time playing video games with them. The problem has been, in prior years, that I always felt that getting absorbed in a video game with a Learner would take my attention away from other Learners, even though Facilitators highly value one-on-one time with Learners doing virtually anything else (e.g., reading, gardening, arts and crafts, board games). I have also long considered video games a waste of time, even though I know that they are extremely beneficial for many people in many ways. This dismissive mindset about gaming is something I have challenged myself to reconsider as part of my deschooling journey. So at 1 p.m. I logged onto a call with a Learner to play Rogue Lineage. I spent a good amount of time that morning deleting files from my computer to make space for Roblox. I was able to download the game and got all set up, but the Learner who was going to play was less than impressed with how little I understood of the game, and how to do even basic functions with my keyboard. The Learner thanked me for showing up, but said that perhaps I should review a tutorial on the game before the next effort, and he shared a tutorial with me..

After the attempt at gaming, I finished reading *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* by the late David Graeber. It was a fascinating but long read, and I highly recommend it. Then I opened up Akilah Richard's *Raising Free People: Unschooling as Liberation and Healing Work,* in anticipation of the conversation I would be having about the book that evening with the Education Conversations Book Group. At 2 p.m. a Learner joined me for the free write offering I scheduled for 30 minutes each day during the remote cycle. She worked on her comics and I worked on writing some thoughts about Abrome and the pandemic. The 30 minutes flew by, and the Learner said it seemed like it was not enough time to really get into a groove. We agreed to meet for an hour each day moving forward.

At the afternoon roundup only two Learners showed up on time, and one joined a bit late. The prompts were, "what surprised you about the day?" and "what disappointed you?" The surprises and the disappointments were largely the same: technical issues, my ability to game, and attendance at the afternoon roundup. We reviewed how we did with our practices and found that no one had really stayed hydrated during the day. Then we finished the

meeting with the counting game and everyone went on their way. After they all logged off I thought about how I had spent my day—mostly on my butt. I missed the vibrant nature of being outdoors with Learners, but I recognize the value of holding space for the Learners who are remote, and bracing for what seems certain to be a fully remote scenario in the coming weeks if we as a society do not quickly flatten the curve.

ALC LatAm: Latin American Network

A collective of facilitators and organizers from across member projects organized several events to support families and communities in Latin America. While folks from a range of places were involved, many are based out of Educambiando and CAAD, in Veracruz and Querétaro respectively, in Mexico.

ALC-Himia "Facilitando Futuros Deseados" (Facilitating Desired Futures)

https://www.alc-himia.org. Online event. Open Space Format.
Organized and Facilitated by Isela Mondragón, Alex Aldarondo, and Rubén Alvarado.

"We feel that we are entering an optimal time to create images of the realities that we desire: clear and true. Also, subsequent processes that allow us to crystallize and materialize them. Honor, thank and leave behind the past that is no longer useful.
The format of the event is known as 'Open Space', this means that there will be simultaneous sessions and the attendees will be able to self-direct to the activity that seems most relevant to them. They can move between sessions if they wish, stay only in one or not enter one if they want to take a break. Likewise, if any of the attendees wish to facilitate an emerging session on the question 'How to Facilitate Desired Futures?', We welcome you to do so (there is no obligation to do so, of course). 'ALC-Himia' happens partially in the Economy of Generosity, we offer some Gift spaces; Likewise, the money collected from the sale of tickets will be used to support the Latin American LAC Network and its members in the continuation of their operations."

Participants: 35-40 Full Scholarships (Gifts): 10. Partial Scholarships: 10 ish.

Speakers / Facilitators from 9 Countries: Romania, Germany, USA, México, Ecuador, Puerto Rico, Costa Rica, Netherlands, Colombia.

Attendees: 10+ Countries: Romania, Germany, USA, México, Ecuador, Puerto Rico, Costa Rica, Netherlands, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, etc.

Deschooling Convivium.

Querétaro, México. February 2020.
Organized by: Isela Mondragón, Marina Mondragón, and Zucy Reyes

Facilitated by: Rubén Alvarado

Spaces for compassionately observing, integrating and starting to transcend the lived effects of patterns and habits emerged and/or strengthened by our schooling experiences, at school and outside of it.

This events exists in the spirit of Game and Gift.
20+ Participants.

 **¿Qué es un Kanban y cómo hacerlo?** https://youtu.be/ccKD2cjZays

Espacios Abiertos / Open Spaces

We created a Series (3) of Open Space-format events Called "Serie de Espacios Abiertos, Dejar ir-Dejar Venir" in February that aimed to:

1. Create bridges of communication, connection and creation for our communities in the initial state of the pandemic while
2. Facilitating the emergence of dynamics of letting go, visualizing and crystalizing.
3. We had 40 participants from 6 countries who directly impact 767 people in their communities, through: Education, Art, Caretaking, Permaculture, Sciences, etc.

They took place in February-March 2020.

 **Centros de Aprendizaje Ágil** https://fb.watch/2sEBHt0sDh/

Event intro video from Facebook invitation

Demographics

In each category, totals and percentages include all who directly participated in co-creating the gatherings, including members of the organizing team.

General:

Participants	Percent of Total
Families	25%
Organizations	48%
Independent	15%

Location (Country):

Location	Percent of Total
México	73%
Ecuador	5%
Brazil	3%
Puerto Rico	8%
Peru	3%
Argentina	3%
Colombia	3%

Arenas and Occupations:

Category	Percent of Total
Educator	35%

Facilitator	28%
Artist	10%
Living Being	10%
Heart of the Home	10%
Playful Being	10%
Dancer	5%
Lawyer	5%
Yoga Instructor	5%
Government Employee	3%
Salesperson	3%
Mother	3%
Uncertain	3%
Biologist	3%
Professor	3%
Agile Learner	3%
Manager	3%
Org. Consultant	3%
Designer	3%
Urban Agriculture	3%
Medicine	3%
Bees	3%
Inspiration	3%

Impact

Participants Intended to Share Learning With:

N/A: 5
Family: 10
An Organization or Project Team: 20
An Independent Person or Project: 1

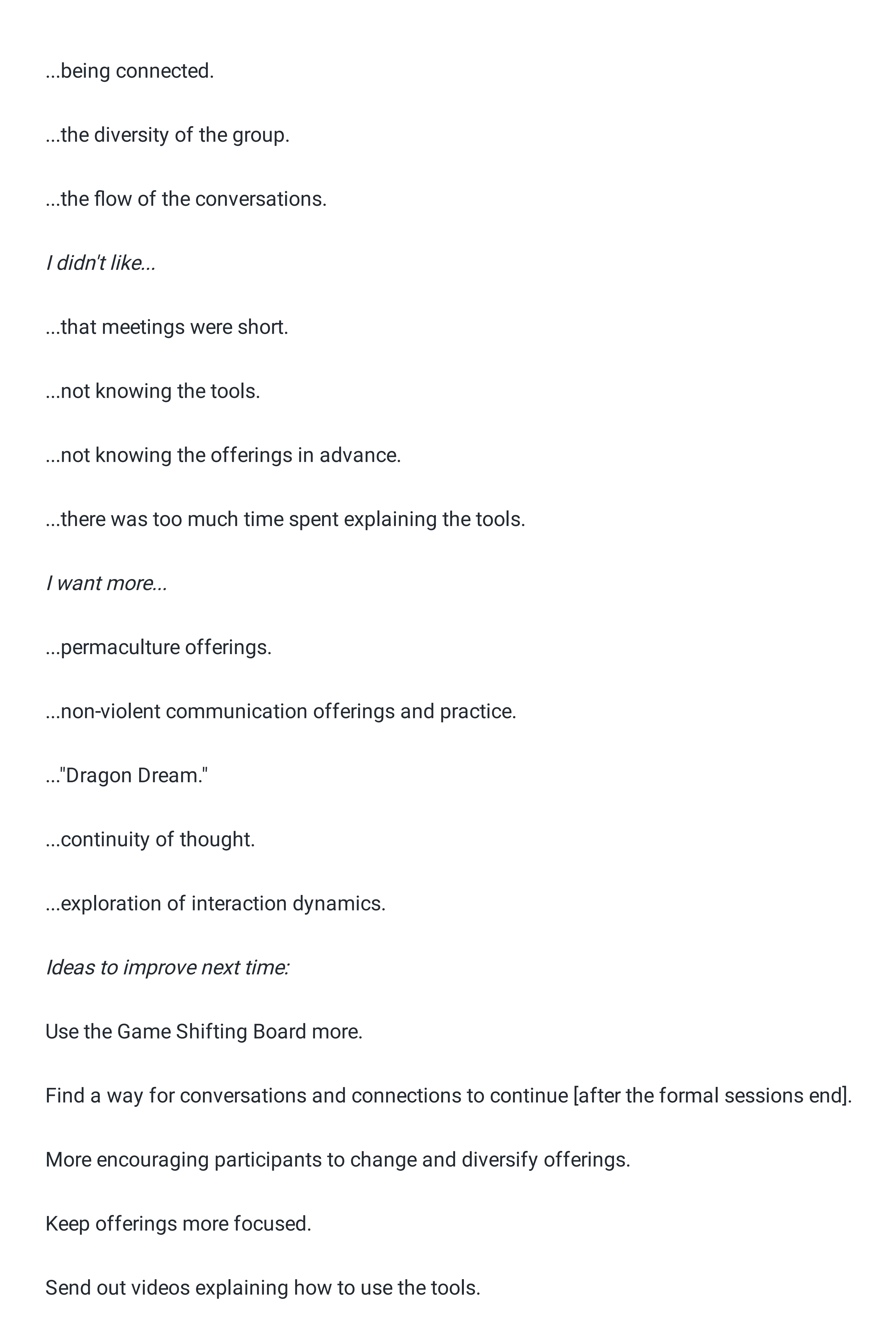
Character of Organizations and Projects Referenced:

General: 1
Arts: 4
Education: 19
Government: 1
Health: 2
Community Organization: 6
Environmental: 1

Measuring the Impact:
Participants of this wisdom exchange estimated that as they shared their learning and experiences with their families, organizations, and projects the initial impact of the project would grow to 767 people.

Feedback

I loved...


...being connected.

...the diversity of the group.

...the flow of the conversations.

I didn't like...

...that meetings were short.

...not knowing the tools.

...not knowing the offerings in advance.

...there was too much time spent explaining the tools.

I want more...

...permaculture offerings.

...non-violent communication offerings and practice.

..."Dragon Dream."

...continuity of thought.

...exploration of interaction dynamics.

Ideas to improve next time:

Use the Game Shifting Board more.

Find a way for conversations and connections to continue [after the formal sessions end].

More encouraging participants to change and diversify offerings.

Keep offerings more focused.

Send out videos explaining how to use the tools.

"Ofrecimientos Inter-ALC LATAM"

April-June.
Practitioners (students, facilitators, principals and other guests) organized online gatherings to continue facilitating SDE experiences among our Latin American communities.
"We had various talks, among others: mindfulness, languages, art, music, how to make a solar oven, the digestive system, storytelling, communication networks, planting, etc."

Participants: CAAD ALC, La Orquídea, Educambiando, Alex Aldarondo, Ana Isaura González, Gabriela Jiménez.



Las emociones de mamá https://youtu.be/Qc8den07X1Q

Gastonia Freedom School: Gastonia, North Carolina, USA

Gastonia Freedom School has videos and their covid-19 plan on their website at https://gastoniafreedom.org/



Gastonia Freedom School - An Agile Learning Center https://youtu.be/NKIthu34jdE

Student video from Gastonia Freedom School



Gastonia Freedom School Tour https://youtu.be/u7E7WQBtifE

Space Tour Gastonia Freedom School

Founder and facilitator Crystal Byrd Farmer -- in addition to hosting our ALC Network spring webinar sessions on technology, 21st century skills, and the intersection of disability and self-directed education -- celebrated the publication of her book The Token: Common Sense Ideas for Increasing Diversity in Your Organization *in late 2020.*



Ep 198: Painful Truths and Opportunities for Change from the Perspectives of "The Token" - Raising Free People™ Network

https://raisingfreepeople.com/198/



The Token, Common Sense Ideas for Increasing Diversity in Your Organization | Alliance for Self-Directed Education

https://www.self-directed.org/tp/the-token/

Green School Romania: Cluj-Napoca, Romania

From founder and facilitator Dr. Sonia-Maria Donca-Bercuci, who is also a key contributor to the research group of the Alliance for Self-Directed Education and the event planning group for the Summerhill Centenary celebrations:

I will write here a few thoughts on Green School in 2020 (for the annual report). I added pictures from our ALF, along with few from the school year (we had the chance of being face to face starting June). Here are our thoughts: for Green School Romania, 2020 was a year of gratitude and appreciation, of resilience and transformation.



a circle of learners

We started the school year growing and healing from all the mistakes and the fights to validate the self-directed and the nature based philosophies in Romania and little did we know that March will bring one of our biggest challenges: from nature directly to online learning. As agile learners, facilitators and managers, we adapted to the new context and dived into agile learning from home. We zoomed in and out of our passions, interests and intentions and we learned a lot about listening to each other, self-care, mental health, emotional support, compassion and appreciation for each encounter.

In June we went back to working face to face, nature-based setting and we valued each moment and each drop of rain (because it poured every single day for a month).

In July we hosted our second ALF summer event (adapted to the Covid-19 restrictions regarding number of people and event length). 18 people joined our event: 6 kids and teens, 8 adult learners and 4 ALFs hosting the event (Sonia from Green School ALC, Luiza - online - from Rubik School ALC, Claudia from Rainbow, Mihaela freelance facilitator). We had one week of woodcrafting, board games, coding, music, searching for fossils, shadow theatre,

improvisation theatre, learning about learning, children psychology and the agile learning approach. The summer continued with other Agile Learning Summer camps for children and youth and the new school year started in September, face to face.

When November brought as the news that the schools will be closed again we already knew that the Agile Learning is on our side and we are embracing, with gratitude, each day when we get to meet and learn from each other online. The children are really happy, although missing a more genuine human connection, and our hills and muddy areas and workshops and makerspace, but learning does not stop with Covid. If anything, is even more powerful!



also a circle of learners

Rivers and Roads: Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, USA

From Amber Sawyer, founder / facilitator / director and ALC Network support call host of the past 3 years:

 Rivers And Roads 2020 for Net. Report https://vimeo.com/492617305/6c83a7df11

January 2020:

A book club was formed. We played and rested. Cooking classes continued- there was a heavy emphasis on curry and juice making. There were Korean and Japanese classes. We took multiple computers apart. We put together boards and a pamphlet for a school choice conference. This process was insightful because we had the students cultivate the words they thought defined us most. They landed on :self directed education, OKC is our classroom, kids rule the school, and multi-age community. The students also directed and represented Rivers and Roads at the School Choice event.

February 2020:

We explored our creek and river systems. We gardened. Cake baking was the focus of cooking class. Curry making was still happening on the regular. We did a week full of egg drop activities. A committee formed to focus on putting up new art in our space and renovating some of the classrooms. We golfed. WE painted. We renovated. We enjoyed time with our two school cats. WE explored downtown okc more regularly with the hopes of forming a flying squad that would invite other self-directed people to meet up with rivers and roads students. One of our moms that studied ballet in Brazil started offering a weekly ballet offering.

March 2020

There has been a group of students that have been working on a board game for the last three years. This month was a big focus period for them. They started a lot of the character development and map making. We did more hiking, ballet, and painting. We learned how to make doughnuts. A pedicure shop was opened. We bagan remote learning March 13th

April-July 2020

We co-created a remote learning website. We adapted and trouble -shooted as we learned. A couple of the major obstacles were sleep schedules and making sure people didn't feel

obligated to attend meetings. This allowed us to come up with using Flipgrid so people could sometimes work on their own time table and still collaborate with each other. This helped a lot of the group projects still have progress and feedback. This is our website - we still use this for our students that are not attending in person this year, as well as for students to have access to after school hours and on weekends.
https://sites.google.com/view/riversandroadsremotelearning/workshops

August- November 2020

We started a new school year! Here is a compilation newsletters we publish for our parent group:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1OIjTAcGLCIDQGHG65UXv3YJU5XcWGvokEN-c2OsjMxs/edit?usp=sharing

Appendix II: Highlights from the Spring 2020 Webinar Series Transcripts

Crystal Byrd Farmer, in "21st Century Skills"

[00:31:04.780] - Crystal

A lot of ALCs, since they're small, things can kind of move with the flow, you know, with the student's interests. So we don't have to say, "Well, we set the week and we have this one schedule for the week and that's what we're going to do. No questions asked." We can say, "OK, well, we were planning on this, but there are a couple of kids out sick." Or, you know, "as a facilitator, I'm not really interested in that subject right now. And if nobody else is going to show up, then why am I going? So I'm going to do something else."

[00:31:35.010] - Crystal

There's a lot of times when I come to school and I have an offering and the kids are like, no. And it's just like, "OK, well, now I'm going to do something different because they said they don't want to do that." And that's a challenge for me because – why? Because. [laughs] So that adaptability is important, and it's very important when we live in a world that has technology that changes constantly.

[00:32:04.450] - Crystal

The phone that I have right now? 10 years ago it was completely different. And so if I'm not able to understand what changes are happening and how to interact with that, then I'm going to get left behind. Initiative and self direction is important. So if you're a gig worker, or if you're working in a job that you have a lot of different responsibilities, you need to be able to identify problems and then apply– apply solutions to them to go and do something without somebody telling you. And when you're in a traditional school environment, there's nothing that you don't do unless somebody has told you to do it. You don't even go to the bathroom unless you raise your hand and said, "can I go to the bathroom?" So when you have a group of kids, you want to encourage that initiative and self direction by not jumping

in when something goes wrong.

[00:32:58.870] - Crystal

A lot of times as parents, we want to make something go away: if the kids [are] arguing, if they're having a disagreement, if they don't know what they're going to do as far as the game. A lot of times you want to jump in and just say, "OK, you have the red, you have the blue and that's it." If we let those kids kind of work out what's going what's going on, and what they want to do, they're using their communication skills, their negotiation skills, they're practicing listening to somebody, practicing, calming and regulating their emotions. So when you give them that opportunity to figure something out between them, you're preparing them for a future world where there won't be a boss, or my mom, standing outside and saying, "OK, do this." You know, you're preparing them to take the initiative on their own.

[00:33:50.720] - Crystal

The other thing is that the world is changing and the people that we're interacting with come from different parts of the country, different parts of the world, they have different native languages. They have different cultures. And being aware of those cultures is important because if you just go and act like, "OK, this is how middle class American culture is and that's how it should be. And I'm just going to go and do everything in that kind of way."

[00:34:17.030] - Crystal

Well, some of those ways we know are harmful to other people. And so it's important to teach your kids– to teach your kids that we grow up one way and there are people growing up a different way. And when those people grow up a different way, they also want to honor and value the things that they grew up with. Just because they've moved to a place that has a different culture, doesn't mean they want to abandon their own culture, and we have to recognize that the culture I grew up in may have some things that are not useful, that are harmful, that maybe I should think about changing.

Antonio Buehler, in "What About College?"

01:32:25.390] - Antonio: All right, so going back to school. I'm preaching to the choir here. This is a slide that I often use when I'm dealing with parents, but the pyramid structure of schooling leads children to believe they're losers. I did have this graph, I took it off for this presentation, but it had the likelihood, the belief of the likelihood of success in school and it was a survey of kids entering into preschool. And every two years it was just asking them, like, "do you believe you're going to be successful at school?" At the preschool level, 90 percent of kids thought that they were going to be successful at school. Four years later, it was down to, I believe, 60 percent. It was just a continual decrease. The kids– fewer and fewer kids thought that they were going to be successful in their school over a span of four years. And if you take that all the way out through high school, it just keeps decreasing. And so the way that we structure academics, or schooling, for kids in our society is we convince most of them that they're going to be failures, or that they're losers because they haven't risen to the top. There's only so much room at the top, and schooling allows for that– that notion of success to be very narrow. So there are very few people are able to consider themselves successes in that regard. Fifteen thousand hours of children's lives are spent in school.

[01:34:11.820] - Antonio: So we obviously opted out of conventional schooling because we're in the self-directed education world, so we opted out of that, which is great. I already talked about financial, but, you know, if you think about it, the way that our society is set up financially, right, it's the people at the top of the pyramid, they don't just make the most because they create the most value. What they're doing is they're just capturing the value that's created by everyone lower than the in the pyramid. Right? And that's the way our economy is set up. The higher you are on that pyramid, the more power that you have, the more of the economic surplus that you get to take. And so even though the people at the bottom create most of the wealth in society, it's the people at the top who take most of the wealth. And people talk about how the people at the top took all the risk and invested the capital. And I'm sure there are certainly risks in starting companies, and there's certainly investment that is made within companies. But the great thing about this recent economic downturn - a depression - that has been shown, is that without the workers, without the essential workers, or without the workers, there is no value in these companies. Yet we as a society have made it very clear that we don't value the workers in most cases. All right.

[01:35:53.850] - Antonio: So. I said that instead of measuring accomplishment through academics, career, professional success ,and financial success, we could focus on redefining accomplishment as contribution to the world. So how do we contribute to the world? Here are just four examples. We can improve lives by addressing social ills. We can

serve others through market function; so this means, basically, starting a company that is able to meet the needs of people. Create knowledge for the sake of humanity - like you just want to add to human knowledge. Or you can make the world a more beautiful place through art. These are just examples of how we can contribute to the world. One thing that we as facilitators that ALCs are all doing is we're contributing through the world, through the creation of community, and valuing children for who they are in the moment, not for who they could become someday. So I would argue that in many ways, many of us already feel high degrees of accomplishment because we are living our lives through contribution to the world. But the question is, how do we allow young people to also have that sort of perspective of accomplishment? So when we focus on contributing to the world, there's no need to get to the top of the pyramid, right? Because when you're contributing to the world generally, it's not about outperforming other people. You don't have to be number one in creating knowledge. Now, don't get me wrong, there's still competition in the world of academia and there's still competition in the world of creating art, getting into galleries, etc. There's no question there's that there's still, in many ways, competition in those areas. But when your focus is on contributing to the world, your focus is on making other people's lives better, improving communities, improving sustainability, etc. There's less of a focus to rise to the top. The measure of success isn't based on who you beat out. Typically, it's usually based on being able to contribute.

[01:38:24.200] - Antonio: And that leads us to the third component of leading a remarkable life. And that's meaning. So meaning is the third component and meaning - I pulled this from Victor Frankl, who you may have already, he was someone who survived the Holocaust in a concentration camp, and then he became a renowned psychologist - and he said that we can discover meaning in life in three ways. We can create a work or do a deed. We can discover meaning by experiencing something or encountering someone. Specifically he says, "When we experience something such as goodness, truth or beauty, we bring ourselves into relationship with that thing, the goodness, truth and beauty that we see around us enter into us and become a part of us. We are engaged with them and they are engaged with us in their own way. When we experience another human being, we enter into a relationship with him or her." So that's a second way of discovering meaning in life, according to Victor Frankl. And the third is by the attitude that we take to unavoidable suffering. And so someone who survived a concentration camp, this obviously has a lot of meaning to him, right? He could not avoid the suffering that was a part of being in that environment. But he tried to he tried to take the best that he could away from it. And he said everything that can be taken from a man– "everything can be taken from a man but one thing" is what he said, "the last of the human freedoms, the freedom to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances."

[01:40:23.570] - Antonio: Therefore, we create meaning by deliberately doing all the above, by creating work or deed, by experiencing something or encountering someone, and our attitude to the way that we react to a given set of circumstances. And each of you ideally have been able to find meaning in your life. Me personally, I've found meaning in creating alternatives to oppressive systems, at least that's what I'm trying to do, and to be in relationship to those that I work with within those alternatives and by responding to oppression and undermining, that's like my way of creating meaning within my life. And ideally, everyone gets that opportunity. Contributing to the world gives life meaning. So what-- meaning is about contributing to something greater than oneself. Giving. And meaning is enduring, right?

[01:41:25.080] - Antonio: So I spoke previously of happiness. The difference between happiness and meaning is that happiness is something that is temporal. It's a moment in time. It feels good because we're34 eating ice cream, or we finally get to go to sleep after not sleeping in a long time, or we make a great connection with someone that we've been missing. Happiness is by definition fleeting, right? Because after happiness comes moments of less happiness, right? And without the down moments, we can't necessarily have the higher moments. We want more happiness than not, in our lives. But the one thing that we can have, even when happiness is not necessarily there, is meaning because that's enduring that just– that can last even through the unhappy times. In terms of meaning I pulled this quote from a book that we read through the ALC book group Braiding Sweetgrass, and this also reflects on contribution as well. "Isn't the purpose of education to learn the nature of your own gifts and how to use them for good in the world?" So this is a great example of, you know, looking at education through a lens of how we can contribute, how we can find meaning in the world. All right, so how do we how do we help young people lead remarkable lives? Happiness, accomplishment and meaning. They can lead remarkable lives to get into Harvard or Stanford or any other top school, right? Because this is a webinar about college. And so they can lead a remarkable life as sort of the end around, in a positive way, to the strictly competitive space of playing the game the best that it can be played way to getting to the top. And they can lead a remarkable life through happiness, accomplishment and meaning.

[01:43:30.210] - Antonio: With regards to happiness for young people, there are things that we can do as facilitators or parents, we can eliminate oppression within their lives. That doesn't mean that we eliminate challenges. Challenges are good, generally, if they can be overcome. We want to eliminate oppression, though, we want to take away oppressive environments. We want to take away people who are going to oppress them. We want them

generally to be liberated and free. Unlimited free play is a great way to promote happiness for young people. Something we all believe in self-directed education is giving them agency over their lives. The more agency they have, the more likely it is that they're going to be happy. And then this one is– this is actually for parents and facilitators– is spending time with them. So don't outsource spending time with kids, don't hand them off to other people, necessarily. Don't just hand them some entertainment, but be available for them to be in conversation with them, to play games with them, to listen to them, etc.

[01:44:40.600] - Antonio: Accomplishment, the second one, in order to help them lead remarkable lives. We take the focus off of the other measures of accomplishment. So don't weigh them down with academic career, or financial concerns about what it means to be successful in life. Ignore GPAs, SATs, college admissions and the first job. When we talk to kids, make it very clear to them that they're not valued based on where they're going in life. They're valued just for who they are in the moment, because every human being is valuable. Allow them to define accomplishment according to their own terms. And if they can define accomplishment according to their own terms, they're much less likely to be drawn in to wanting to be in competitive rank-based hierarchies. And then give them the space and time to dive deep into things that they care about so they can have those you know, they can experience accomplishment in different ways, particularly when it comes to contributing to others, to the world, to their communities.

[01:46:07.020] - Antonio: And then lastly, meaning. And meaning has to come from them, right? It's not something that's going to be that they're subjected to. So forcing them to do some sort of volunteer project doesn't give them the same type of meaning as them deciding that they want to participate in a cause that helps other people. So allow them to create and find opportunities that contribute to society, in ways that are relevant to them. Allow them to own their own education and be in relationship with others, and again, motivation must be intrinsic. So three things, happiness, accomplishment and meaning, right? Those are three things that we're focused on. Happiness, the variability of happiness that we most control is mindset, circumstances, yes, but mindset in particular. Right? Circumstances - ou can change the context sometimes, not always, but change the context. One thing I always tell parents who come in and visit with me and they say that their kids are miserable; I say "you don't have to send your kids to Abrome, but for God's sake, get them out of that situation. You can homeschool starting today. Don't ever send them back to the school that they're miserable in. Whether it's for bullying, whether it's for for academic reasons, whether it's the unhealthy relationship with the adults, just change the context. That alone can make all the difference for the for that child." And, of course, self-directed education is drastically

changing in context.36 But mindset: that is the thing that we can control the most. And if the kid– if the young people can implement some of these things into their mindset, that's going to be huge in terms of their happiness. Contribution as an accomplishment. If we can get young people to consider contribution as a much better measure for themselves of accomplishment than academic career, and financial success, then they're much more likely to lead remarkable lives.

[01:48:19.880] - Antonio: And then lastly, meaning, right? So a meaningful life requires them to be able– all the things I talked about, like with Victor Frankl, right? Giving to a cause greater than yourself, increasing your– I'm actually forgetting them off my head because it's so late in the presentation. But the things that Viktor Frankl talked about, like meaningful life, allowing kids to lead a meaningful life, will allow them to lead a remarkable life. And so when we look at all these things together - happiness, accomplishment, meaning - what's interesting is, is how they reinforce each other. And for people who choose self-directed education, they are often able to see how beautifully this happens. But I drew some arrows in here. Right. You know, being able to focus on mindset, for example. One of those is like being a part of a community, and being a part of a community directly feeds into leading a meaningful life, and meaningful life allows you to focus on doing things for others, right? The opposite of selfishness. That leads into contribution as accomplishment, right? And they all feed into each other and they all reinforce each other.

Anthony Galloway, Jr. (and Spencer Babcock and Abby Oulton), in "Staying Connected to Why")

00:12:28] - Anthony: Sometimes we don't even start out at necessarily what we want or what our values are, we're just doing it. But it's really important to realize, is there another way? And this goes back to the Change Up process with the Community Mastery Board, that we were looking at earlier, where based on your need or value, there might be more than one way to accomplish this. There might be a way to do this that actually meets the needs of all parties involved. And that's why we try to challenge students, and we challenge ourselves, not to get fixated on how it gets done. Because if what's important to you is maybe fun, making sure that everybody's having fun, or making sure that everybody is involved, or maybe for our meetings, if it's important to you that the meetings are quick or time efficient, there are a lot of different ways that we can accomplish that, actually. And it doesn't have to be some specific idea that you came up with, because no matter what, there are other needs and values that also have to be considered. So funny enough, even in a SDE space - I put these questions last, but usually we tend to start out with these questions. But in talking to

adults or parents, it's always necessary to sort of meet people where they are and then bring them into our space and asking, OK, we've asked you, what do you want? What are your values? What do you want for your kid? Now, what does your young person actually want? What do they value? What's important to them? What if they don't want what you want for them? And how do you reconcile that discrepancy? So we'll come back to those questions together and sort of dialogue about some of that. But I want to move on and show some of the rest of the tips. That's a repeat of the questions. Something else I want people to remember is that you have to be honest with yourself about these questions. And again, that's why sometimes it can take time and you really have to do some work and dig in. It's not just about saying the things you think are right or what you think is socially acceptable, because these answers are actually for you, not for others. Because whether you acknowledge the true answer or not, it's still what's driving and directing all the6 decisions that you're making for you, your family, your household, your young person, your students, if you are an educator. All of that is at play. So you have to acknowledge and call that stuff out.

[00:14:53] - Anthony: Some other stuff to remember is that, like there's that book, Simon Sinek, 'Let's start with why' or 'Finding your why'. But like, that's not - I mean, it would be great if we could all do that all the time. But sometimes, it just doesn't happen. So sometimes you have to back into it, after looking at what you're doing and you're trying to figure out what's wrong or what's not working. You have to be invested, though, also in this process. It's a rediscovery process and you have to stay connected to it and you're always checking in on it. Eventually it becomes a habit of yours to be aware of this and be plugged in. But at the beginning, you really have to remind yourself and sort of dig deep into these moments, until it becomes just sort of a part of how you exist.

[00:15:39] - Anthony**:** In addition, motivations, needs and values can shift. Sometimes that affects the efficacy of what you do. So right now, what might be important to you is that your child is just having fun. And so that's why it can be easy for some parents and educators to be like, 'Oh, I can let my five or six year go to this SDE space and let them play all day, because I don't want my five or six year old to have homework right now or I don't think they need to be reading chapter books right now'. But then sometimes your motivations or needs shift and you start to think that, 'Oh, I want them reading' or 'I want them doing math'. And again, in that sense, you really have to ask yourself why. Like, is literacy really what you value or is there something under that, or are math skills that you value? Why did you stop valuing your child having freedom and fun? And again, these are difficult questions to ask and answer, but they are important to ask. Important to stay

connected to. Few things also to think about, this would be part of what we also share, is sort of what did you learn was actually important when growing up? What did you learn to value? How was that message delivered and how has that helped or hindered you as you got older? As you were young? Is anybody else willing to share some of their answers to these questions or what's going on for them?

[00:17:17] - Abby: You know, I really appreciate that you've got an explicit like, 'Is there more than one way to accomplish this?' Because often... I mean, I like to ask, like, what am I not seeing? But often, if I value their playing because I value their joy and the skill building that I trust they're doing, and I value a variety of literacies and they're getting to develop that and to learn how to keep7 developing different literacies as they grow, then that reminder to ask, 'Is there more than one way?' helps me step back and see maybe these things aren't in conflict the way they initially appear to be. Which is often helpful for me, especially with teenagers.

[00:18:32] - Anthony: Yeah, I think the... oh Spence has their hand up, I forgot about that function. Go ahead, Spence. [00:18:41] - Spence Yeah, something that I've thought about recently is how my... maybe the focus that... the things I want sort of change. And I came to this new sort of want, I guess, and you know, I've been doing this sort of unschooling stuff for a while, self-directed learning for a while, and recently where I reflected on my own childhood and how I was forced to go to these after school reading classes, because I was like dyslexic and I did it for like seven years. And I saw it as like, you know, good intentions of my parents to do that for me, to try and help me to learn, but I actually discovered that - through therapy, actually - that the forced nature of that actually silenced my, like, voice. And I've seen a huge ripple effect of negative consequences throughout my life because of that. And there wasn't really a check in on my social emotional needs surrounding that topic. So thinking about my own son, like the social emotional is now my biggest value and the thing that I care about the most. And when he ever learns to read and all that kind of stuff, whatever the topic or a thing that he might be interested in or not learning yet, that will come at some point when it's necessary. But like the thing that feels really top of my priority list is that he figures out how to, like, speak up for himself and have his emotional, mental needs met as he feels that he needs them. So that was my piece to add there.

[00:20:45] - Anthony: Cool cool, thank you, for participating.

[00:20:55] - Participant: I'll jump in. Can you hear me? Ok, cool. When I look at this list, I think about what type of like, community I want to be a facilitator in, because I'm kind of... like, we're at a place here where I live, where there was a project that dissolved and a new project

that was being started, and the pandemic hit. And then it's like, all right, well, is that other project starting? Will it continue to grow? I don't know. So now I'm back to like, how do I get involved and what are my values? Where do I want to put my time during this time where everything has shifted back to being online? I guess I never imagined that things would be online instead of offline. So I'm trying to, like, reimagine what's important to me, because what was really important to me was doing more stuff in person. And I wanted to do a lot more things with kids in person that I feel like I'll8 probably be able to do right now. So this was just like, it doesn't really give me answers but just more ways to, like, figure out how I can come up with what I can do with my time now. Thank you for this.

[00:22:04] - Anthony: I wanted to add a piece about the - that actually Abby highlighted - the concept of there being more than one way to accomplish something. We find when parents express interest in our school, they come to the school, you know, one of the most frequently asked questions is, 'Well, how do they read, write, learn math, go to college if you're not making them do it?' And it's an interesting question because the question sort of says, well, if it's not this way, what other way is there? What are the other methods? And so it suggests that there might be some other way. But also the person asking the question tends to be in a place of like, 'This doesn't make sense. What you're doing is magic', or rather, they're looking for a very specific methodology, a step one, step two, step three, that really replicates what they know, what they've experienced, but not necessarily in that same framework. And so it's harder for people to imagine that actually, there's a way that this can get done without forcing it. Just because it is something that you were sort of forced or led to do doesn't mean that it's not something that can naturally occur in the young person. There's an assumption that the young person doesn't naturally want to become more capable in life and in their community and in the spaces that they operate in, that that desire won't come for them just because it wasn't allowed to naturally come for you. And I think, as some people have been pointing out, do you believe that's the only way? Are you open to finding out or knowing that there's another way to accomplish it?

[00:23:57] - Anthony: This is the sort of final question for me, when we have these kinds of conversations or discussing self directed education specifically with people, because then that tells me whether or not they're even open to the conversation or to experimenting with other things, if they can't at least be open to the idea that maybe there's another way. Because after a few years of doing this, I'm very much not in a place of defending and/or convincing and arguing and having sort of an intellectual battle with people about whether the way we do schooling, our education, is effective or healthy or right, because that's an endless conversation and that's just not the space that I want to operate from. For me, it's

just about here's a way to do it. And I prefer this way. It's really fun for me. It's really fun for the kids and great for the parents. And this is just the way that I prefer. And if that's not OK for you, if that's too uncomfortable for you, then that's fine. There might be some other way to do it. Part B of that is, I think when we get too attached to a very specific way for something to go or we get attached to how something is supposed to look or the methods there, I think that's when9 we get really dogmatic and very rigid about how we practice whatever we're doing, whether it is Waldorf or Montessori or Agile Learning or Sudbury or project-based learning or anything, there's when we get so attached to 'This is the exact way that it has to be done' and this protocol is what fits for us, then I think we lose and miss out again on staying connected to our why and being able to adjust and adapt based on what works for the young person.

Jennifer Campbell, in "Foundations of Conflict Resolution"

[00:04:02.610] - Jennifer So, we all tell ourselves stories about what we're feeling, and these stories affect how we react to those feelings. When we've experienced trauma or another emotionally charged event, those stories carry extra emotional weight. And so different sensory stimuli that remind us of these events can activate our stress response. It can be anything from a smell or a place or a word or a movement. But anything like that, any kind of like sensory stimulus. That's why they're called triggers. When we practice mindful observation of our reactions, we start to recognize these triggers for ourselves and we start to hear the stories that we tell ourselves. So mindfulness helps you to to understand what you're feeling and what you're thinking, maybe not why, but what, at least. And so this leads to the next skill, which is de-escalation. Another term for the human stress response is the fight-flight-freeze-fawn response. Practicing mindfulness helps us to identify which response we go to when we are in that stressed survival mode. For example, I know that I tend to freeze in stressful situations.

[00:05:36.570] - Jennifer: And so when we're in conflict with someone, then often we get into that survival mode, so we're thinking about our survival and it may not seem like being-ready-to-defend-myself-from-a-bear survival, but the stress response is the same. Whether you are seeing a bear in front of you or staring down a deadline, it might be, like, in bigger or smaller measures, but that stress response, it's the same mechanism in our bodies. Young people are still learning about their feelings and it's the adults' responsibility to first calm themselves down and learn those techniques to self soothe. People have different techniques and you find what works for you. It can be taking deep breaths, taking a break from the situation. And then it's also the adults' responsibility to help the young person to

develop those self-soothing skills as well and to support and scaffold when those skills are still being developed. So, that's part of de-escalation.

[00:07:01.220] - Jennifer: Next is active listening. That means showing the other person that you are mentally and emotionally engaged with what they're saying. Some ways of practicing active listening are paraphrasing the other's words to make sure you understood them, showing through your body language that you're listening, like nodding your head, facing the person with your whole body, putting down your phone and also using eye contact, if that's comfortable for you. Basically showing the person with your whole body that you are engaged in the conversation and not just thinking about what you're going to say next. Feeling identification helps us to understand how we are reacting in the moment and the more precisely we can identify our feelings, the better we understand our reactions. For example, saying "I'm mad", telling myself "I'm feeling mad" gives me information. But telling myself that I am feeling sleepy and irritated and confused tells me, "OK, well, I'm not furious. I could just be dehydrated. I could have not had my tea yet. I could need a nap." Identifying different feelings gives us more information about why we're reacting in the ways that we're reacting.

[00:08:35.680] - Jennifer: And finally, imagining the other person's perspective. This is another way of saying 'empathy.' So if I'm in conflict with someone and I'm focusing on getting my point across and communicating my feelings and I'm not listening to what the other person is saying, then I'm escalating the conflict. But if instead I have calmed myself to the point where I can actively listen to the other person, then I can hear their points and their feelings. And I still might think they're wrong, and I still might have things to say. But now I have prioritized our relationship over being the correct person who's also the winner. And I want to repeat that it's OK to, like, need time to calm yourself, to de-escalate yourself. Like if you're the person who's in conflict, it's OK to step away and say, "You know, I'm having a hard time hearing what you're saying right now, because I feel upset. I'm going to take a break and4 we can come back to this later." If you are mediating a conflict, then it's your job to stay de-escalated so that the people in conflict will be able to hear each other as well.

[00:10:08.570] - Jennifer: And then finally, an unofficial skill is knowing when to walk away. Sometimes the conflict is not worth it. This is where your personal boundaries come in. So, for example, I recently got into a conflict with a friend. And after we had argued a couple different times, different places, I set a boundary that I would not discuss the subject of our conflict with that person. It was emotionally draining for me and I didn't want to compromise our friendship just to get my friend to think like I did. So in that regard, it wasn't important to our relationship for that conflict to be resolved and it was hurting our relationship and so I

said, "All right, we'll just not talk about it with each other." Another great example is road rage. If you haven't been to Texas, it's basically like the Alamo and highways and there's a park somewhere – but mostly highways. And so if someone is tailgating me, then I'm going to let them pass. It's very difficult to de-escalate conflict in different vehicles, at high speeds and road rage can get pretty scary. So knowing when to walk away is also an ego thing too, making sure that the other person hears exactly what you want them to hear is sometimes not important. So, another part of mindfulness.

Appendix III: Highlights from "Holding Unfolding" Podcast Transcripts

Full episodes on Spotify, iTunes, and on SoundCloud at

 **Holding Unfolding by Holding Unfolding** https://soundcloud.com/sde_dispatches/sets/holding-unfolding

from episode 1 with Mel Compo

Mel

That's true. I'm happy to talk quickly about field trips. It really, really relates to one of the agile roots that's very meaningful to me, which is that the medium is the message. Right? We learn more from our culture and from our environment than we do from the things that we're explicitly taught and...

[00:29:51.440]

I live in New York City. I'm born in Brooklyn, and I've been moving through this city my whole life, and there's so much to learn in New York City, not just like explicitly at, you know, institutions that we associate with learning things. Like, you know, I've been to the Museum of Natural History with kids, and we go to the Met regularly. The Metropolitan Museum of Art is a 20 minute walk from ALC-NYC and one of my favorite places in the world, despite its problematic position as an institution.

[00:30:32.270]

So, like, I've had those conversations with kids, you know. So there's the, like, explicit learning museums. We've been to Queens. I once took 10 kids an hour on the subway to the end of the seven line to go to the Queens Science Center together. I think I did that twice, actually, and I remember it very vividly because I got into a really in depth conversation about the nature of good and evil with one of the teens on the way out to the science center.

[00:31:05.630]

Because my other thing about field trips is, like, those kind of conversations happen way more often on the subway than they do anywhere else. And I don't know why. I don't know what is it about the nature of… And it doesn't have to be on the subway. It could be walking. It could be on the bus. But there's something about the nature of being in transit to or from a place in New York City that really– where we've had an experience together that really opens up these big, intellectually curious conversations that I love to have with young people.

[00:31:42.350]

So that's my spiel on field trips.

[00:31:46.160]

Basically, any any intentional adventure that you're having can be a field trip. I've taken field trips to other playgrounds that were deeply rewarding. One time I went on a field trip that some young people organized to the playground next to the Met so that we could all have a really epic game of hide and seek tag. And it was one of the most fun field trips I've been on. I love to go on a field trip that a teen plans and that I can just show up at and say, you know, I'm just the grown up here.

[00:32:22.310]

Like, you lead the way. I think that learning to navigate the world that we live in, both in a material "how do I read a subway map? How do I swipe through the turnstile? Where's a smart place to stand on the platform?" I mean, these are obviously New York City specific considerations, but these are New York City kids that I'm talking to. If I lived somewhere else, I'm sure we would be having different conversations, right, about what's in our ecosystem and what's in our neighborhood and what's in our community.

[00:32:56.090]

It's just that from this position in New York City, I get to talk about so many exciting things. Because of the museums, but also the archipelago. Right? We get to take the ferry from the south of Manhattan all the way out to the Rockaways and talk about what's in the ecosystem and what is an archipelago and the history of building this island. And I feel trips are just an amazing vehicle for shifting your perspective and remembering that learning is happening in natural and all the time.

[00:33:30.110]

You're always doing it, out in the world. And the more that you immerse yourself in the world, the easier it is to see it.

[00:33:39.580] – Abby

Yeah, sure. I love listening– and I'm aware that people are going to listen to this from outside New York City — and I love listening to New Yorkers especially, who work with, like, self-directed kids talk about our experiences of the map of the city, because… Because you're like, "Oh, the good playground for tag!"

[00:34:08.850]

And I'm like, "Oh yeah. And the other one that's great for like snowball fights and sledding, you know?" And there's the… The prominence of different points on our maps shift because they're so youth informed and play informed, and, as you pointed to the way that, like, liminal spaces are, like, our– our locations. Right? It's the subway between school and the Queens Museum, or the path by the Harlem Meer.

[00:34:45.340]

And that's something that, like, the richness of the liminal space is something, and the play spaces was something that I worried a little bit we would lose moving online for covid. And there's a bunch of ways that we've not lost that.

[00:35:10.210]

But your art jam offering that you mentioned earlier is something that I hear from other facilitators and parents and kids that they experience as one of those openings. You know, an expansive space, not totally liminal, but also, like, it is. They can show up and ask about the nature of evil or whatever. And I'm curious about how you hold that space and how you set up that space.

[00:35:53.780] – Mel

I mean, one of the things that I didn't include in my intro, but that I do identify strongly as is that I identify as a witch. I'm a practitioner of liminal spaces, is what I mean by that. I think

that a liminal space is one where you have a lot of…of…choice available to you. Like, future available choices, and that when we hang out in the liberal space with our choices, we get a real sense of expansiveness, which I think is maybe what people relate to in Art Jam, you know? And when I approach these spaces….uh… I think about… I think about…I'm struggling to, to look for spatial words, actually, as I try and describe this. I'm, like, I hold myself on the outside.

[00:37:03.560]

I, you know, I open the center, and I know that that's very abstract. But what feels very important for me with holding these spaces is that it's actually not really about me or my feelings or my interests. I'm always here the full person that I am with my feelings and my interests. So if you want to… If a kid shows up to Art Jam and wants to talk about how werewolfism in Harry Potter is a metaphor for being a man with HIV,

[00:37:36.620]

like, yeah, I could talk to you a lot about that, because that's really at the center of the Venn diagram of our two interests, apparently.

[00:37:44.570]

But if you don't want to talk about that, I'm not attached to that being our topic of conversation today. That if you want to show up and you want to see how many noises your synthesizer can make,

[00:38:02.140]

great. I'm a… I'm open to that as long as everyone else in the Zoom room is consenting. I'm happy to facilitate, "hey, did you check and make sure that everyone in this room is consenting before you press all the buttons on your synthesizer?" but really taking a step back from, like, showing up with, like, this is about me and my wants to, like, this is about whoever is…whoever I'm holding the space for. And I really need to decenter my own expectations in order to be able to hold accurate space for me.

[00:38:39.850]

And that’s not to say I need to shrink myself or pretend like I’m not the full person that I am. But it does mean that if a kid disagrees with me on something, I don’t have to win that argument. It means that if a…if I throw out an invitation to play — I’m like, “Oh, does anyone want to play Scribbl.io right now?” And they’re all like, “No,” great. We don’t have to. And I think that a lot of people get really tied up trying to facilitate spaces where they’re like, “Well, I’m throwing all these things out there and nobody really wants to do the things that I’m suggesting,” as if that’s a failure on your part in some way, when it’s really not. It’s it’s useful information about what people don’t want to do, because the more clear you are about what people don’t want to do, the clearer you can get about what they do want to do and talk about and be and play.

[00:39:44.560]

So, you know, part of my practice as a witch is that I regularly practice stepping outside of myself in it and seeing where I am oriented vis-a-vis the other people or my own thoughts or the choices that are available to me. And then when that comes to facilitation, it’s really about decentering my expectations and opening up space for the other person to explore what they’re here to explore today.

[00:40:27.120] – Abby

And that’s… You do that, and you do it with grace.

[00:40:37.180]

Also a bunch of the other offerings you facilitate are more class– classically considered “classes” where, you know, you can not have attachment to, you know, being ready for the AP bio exam in a month, but theoretically, there is a shared goal. Right? How does your prep and presence for those offerings differ from what you do with Art Jam?

[00:41:17.800] – Mel

It’s a bit of a shift in the…in what people are consenting to when they sign up for the offering. So when you show up to Art Jam, you’re consenting to, like, being in this open space. And I’m consenting to playing in whatever comes up right now. But if you’re showing up for art history, for example, what you’re consenting to is, like, a…

[00:41:42.970]

is giving your full attention to this thing that you've said that you want to learn more about, whatever that means. And so, you know, there's a real difference between the two offerings. Certainly in art history, I do a much more traditional "well, we've been doing a tour of the world around the year fifteen hundred. Right? And we're looking at the –" We just looked at some really incredible Yoruba, Yoruba art that's slightly earlier, it's from the 14th century, but —

[00:42:19.880]

I keep… I check in periodically, right? So, you know, right after winter break, "OK, we're going to be looking at China, Japan and Korea for the next three weeks. Is that what you want to do? Are you interested in this? Great. Let's do it." And I think that you can still build in these cycles of intention and consent, and in that you can make space for people to say,

[00:42:44.870]

"I actually don't want to do this.

[00:42:46.130]

I want to learn about something else. Can we talk about a different place? A different time?" But the– the thread through both offerings is this thread of enthusiastic consent. Do you want to be here right now? What do you want to be doing here right now? And, you know, a teen can enthusiastically consent to wanting to take an AP bio exam or an AP art exam. Right? And or a teen can enthusiastically consent to

[00:43:18.690]

"Actually, I am going to apply to this specialized high school right now. And that means that I need to show up for maths twice a week and be in the quiet room." Or whatever. It's just a matter of making explicit that, yes, this is the thing that you want, and, yes, you are consenting to do it in this form because you know… And I've mentioned before, because I've been also making a science offering all year that started out as biology and then shifted to ecology.

[00:43:49.200]

And it has been interesting to watch as we struggle with “do we want to” and how we want to acquire new information. So we watched a lot of Crash Course videos — shout out to Hank Green, who’s a fabulous science educator, but he talks so fast, like, it’s hard to integrate that information. And so that worked for us for bio. But then as we got into ecology, we decided that we were going to do something slightly different, and we practiced making slideshow presentations of organisms in our ecosystem.

[00:44:20.940]

And that kind of worked. We kind of liked it, but we kind of didn’t. And so, you know, we had a conversation right before our spring break where I said, let me know. I made a proposal about a way that we could continue doing ecology. And a kid brought in a different proposal about, oh, well, maybe we could study a different discipline of science and we could transition to astronomy and, you know, to end the sprint on a conversation about, “OK, this is what we’ve done so far.

[00:44:53.040]

Here’s what we learned. Right. Did we like that? Do we want to go deeper into this thing or do we want to pivot into something else?” It’s the same conversation. I’m having an art jam. It’s just that we’re playing with a different time scale. And so when I do those offerings, I never assume that we want to do it forever or for on and on into eternity. I assume that we want to do it until at least the next break.

[00:45:17.040]

And we’ll check in on it then. But it’s… It’s time travel, it’s playing with time.

[00:45:26.550] – Abby

And just for folks who are very, very new to self directed education, if a kid comes up and is like, I would really like to study chemistry and you have zero interest in chemistry.

[00:45:39.200] – Mel

Oh, yeah.

[00:45:40.530] – Abby

What do you do?

[00:45:42.480] – Mel

I say no. I say, “Oh, my gosh. You know who really likes chemistry? Abby.” And I wouldn’t be wrong.

[00:45:53.130]

Like, it’s a really great thing about being as part of a facilitation team is that I don’t have to fake interest in things that I’m not interested in.

[00:46:03.960]

You know that there is… I trust that there’s another facilitator, and that if there’s not a facilitator, that there’s another kid or there’s another adult in our community who will volunteer like that. There’s another resource out there. That I don’t have to be every resource for every kid, and that I’m a better grown up to them for it, for being able and for being able to model saying, “no, thank you. That’s not for me.”

from episode 5 with Amber Sawyer

Abby
Because you mentioned doing writing workshops and I notice your kids do a lot of — I don’t know whether they do them with you, but — like, a lot of storytelling. Content producing, whether it’s brochures or short films or a podcast.

And I’m wondering about, like, facilitating them learning, like, honing their skills as storytellers. And what that experience is like for you. And if there’s any tricks or tips you have for people who are new to that.

Amber
Yeah, that’s a great question. Storytelling is very important to me, so I guess that is something that I modeled… Not with the intention of, like, I’m going to model this so other people do it. But I think that it just is natural to me and a reverent practice and something I just enjoy.

So, yes, I can talk on what we do… Like just, I can speak on creative writing specifically and then we could talk about, like, podcasting and YouTube videos. Go that way. So creative writing we do all the time, because if someone has a moment, I ask, do you want to tell me a story? And humans love telling their stories. I try to give tips to our parent community on this. A lot of like “please don’t downplay telling stories to your children about a random time when you were 11.”

Like, they grasp on to these things. Like, they’ll come tell me, did you know my parents did this? And like, they want something like — they — they are… They’re so impressed with simplicity. And so that’s, like, a magic that I try to really capture and try not to diminish it. Like, well, that’s not academic. So I think these — these skills are really easy within self directed spaces because they’re very obvious and they’re very natural.

So as long as we’re not doing weird things to it, it just is a constant creative process. Like if they asked me, like, what is that? This one, the comma on the top or the bottom? And I’m like, oh, you mean apostrophe or comma. And so like, I’m happy to give grammar tips as they come. And we learn a lot about grammar that way, but that’s never the intention. So I’m just down for the flow of storytelling.

We do storytelling prompts. We listen to a podcast called “What If World.” That’s a lot of starters. And so sometimes we’ll do what they did that week or we’ll just come up with our own. What if… That’s the “what if we had five million dollars?” So we’ll just we start our morning meetings with a lot of just “Who has a story to tell? Is that a real one or not? Or will we find out as it goes?”

Yeah, I model, I think, the actual act of writing a lot with pen and paper.

I am happy to assist people to learn how to be independent with audio recordings and get them the technology to do voice to text. I think that we do weird things with writing as adults. And we don’t… We maybe have forgotten the complexity that is like let me think about holding this pencil the right way and moving it in all the right directions and be creative and not stop and not get frustrated. So I try to get good read on where you are at and help in the places that might block you and just let you be able to tell your stories.

So that’s, like, creative writing. And then when you see we do do a lot of, like, stop motion, YouTube, podcasting… Just like, make things… A lot of that is Taryn, because she is a great wizard with technology. But that also comes mainly from just the cycle of ALC and the

learning flow of, like, creation and sharing. And so what does that look like for you? It does not have to be a blog every week, but like, let's practice this as an art and a lifestyle.

And like, that can just be you telling me something. Especially as people are navigating the World Wide Web, there's a lot of people that don't consent to putting their work out on the Internet. And I completely understand that and feel that that is never why we are creating or making these things. But we do put an emphasis on "let's share something that's created," and what have you done…and that it can look like anything. I think we, at the beginning of Rivers and Roads, were like, OK….Because if you have started any type of school — ALC, self-directed, or progressive — you know that first year is just like, hold on tight.

Well, at least from my experience. So you kind of just are like, OK, we're doing this. And that's what I thought the beauty of joining the network was; it's like, we were like, standing on the shoulders of so much, like, labor of love and so many people that came before us. You just felt way more grounded in something. Like, I can never be grateful enough for that. But I think within that was still, like, what have I done with my life?

Can I do this? Imposter syndrome thing. OK, I read that we do blog posts on Fridays at ALCs, so we would, like, "OK, everyone we're blogging!" Like, "It's Friday so we're blogging!" And so there was a lot of anxiety around that, and there was a lot of, like, force. And it was a lot of pushback, and so I think throughout that, I was like, this is weird, you're making this weird. No, pause for a second. You're really attached to this one statement.

So what is it? I think we've all sat with that now and co-created that together… What does it mean to share? And what does it mean to, yes, reflect? Yes. So I think a lot of that has just come through that journey.

Abby
Yeah, that's such a kind of classic new facilitator learning, right, is to be like, "Oh, it's actually not about the tool. What is it supposed to do? All right, what is the path of ease and fulfillment that does that?" And maybe you throw the tool out.

You mentioned progressive school. Can you talk a little bit about your journey to self-directed and starting a center and all that?

Amber
Yeah, so we had… I have always known that the education system didn't work for who I am as a person. I grew up with, like, I went to public school, but the way I was raised was very

socially unschooled. Like I was very respected. I, like, my voice genuinely mattered. So I have like… Which is hard to also be a kid that has been told like, no, you don't get to — like, people have to treat you like a human. And then you go to public school and you're like, "You're being rude.

You can't talk to kids like that." So I had a lot of practice and discourse of arguing with teachers in my life. So I — but I went to college and back and forth. I was trying to avoid education for a lot of reasons. I was pre-law most of the time, but then I finish and I have a degree in education and there is a progressive school in my area. Then I also did a little stint with the Peace Corps, which is another conversation.

Just a whole thing. Yes, it's — we could really unload and unpack that. But, but anyway, so I come back and I was back at my progressive school and — which was really a privilege, because I'd been there, I'd worked there on and off from the time I was 19. So I kind of did really early adulthood there and got to see — they were in their fourth year when I started — so I'd seen, like, how to grow a school and make a school and the problems and what can happen fast if you aren't grounded in something and how the school can change rapidly because of money and pressure.

And so I just experienced a lot of that. But as we were having some problems and there was a group of people that were like, OK, what are we? Because that's a really big problem, I think, in progressive schools is it's a very buzz word-y. And I think for me as a human, I know I need like substance. I need like… You say, you're just saying the word Montessori and you're saying the word Reggio Emilia and you're saying it's student led, but it isn't.

And you're saying it's Democratic. But like, I mean, you're just letting them vote in the name of, like, voting. To say, like, we did this and we're just trying to check all the boxes and keep everyone happy. So there was a group of people, like, really dedicated to like, OK, there's other people in the world doing things. Like, let's really hone in on who we are, what we are. And so we actually went to AERO conference.

And that is like when I first like… Let me back up. We did a book club as a staff over a Peter Gray book. There is a quote that he said that was like, progressive schooling is more harmful because it is saying to kids, you're free and you have a say, but it's actually more manipulative at the end of the day because that isn't true. And I mean, I did the ego thing that a lot of people do. Like, oh, my gosh, this guy doesn't know me. Like, I would never.

And I was so offended, but it stuck with me. But I definitely was defensive. And I was like, does he not know how good I am with kids? You know, all the annoying things. How many hours have I put into this? How… But anyway, so there was kind of, like, the quote. And through him, we went to the AERO conference and that's when I learned about ALCs, because there were a group of people there. It was in…

Seattle? It was in Portland. And I met people there and just started taking it all in. And I was like, OK, our school is going to do this. Like, we're going to make it happen. And it wasn't. And that's OK, too. But at the time, I actually started doing ALC tools in my second and third grade classrooms. Because that is the way that we were mixed-age was two grades. But. I started doing that, but I also had too much of the "right information" to me. Like my truths were revealed within unschooling and self direction, and what I knew was right and important. And so, for instance, there was a student of mine who was… This is the second group. So like, a seven year old filling notebooks full of comics. Like I'm not being dramatic: notebooks full. And I'm like, oh, my goodness, this is amazing. Like, he is like… so creative and I'm so proud.

And, and there was a couple of things. And this isn't the only thing, but there was a moment where I was like, we have to do math. Like we just have to, because that's the way the school runs. And. He looks at me like, "but I can't stop." But I'm in my mind, he has to. Like literally it's my job to make him stop what he's doing. And I was like… And I said these words, and he's beautiful and precious, and he's looking at me.

And I said, "I need you to do this for me, please." And like, I saw him, like, sacrifice what he was doing because of our relationship. And it clicked to me, "Oh, this is really gross." Like, I have spent a lot of time building a very strong relationship with this person so that he can be manipulated by me.

And so I felt at that time that a lot of my

effort was going into making genuine relationships, but so that I could have power over their choices. And it was very scary to see. I would never want to, like, make light of the situation, but like, those types of like…blurring the lines of what is consent and what is adults manipulating you in their relationships with you…I'm breaking trust with you and, like, you genuinely trust me. So you're doing this, but I don't believe it's the right thing. You just have to do it and you have to listen to me.

And then also that person's mom was like "he didn't put a period at the end of one of his many comics, and so, like, he doesn't even know grammer." And I was like, oh, this isn't for me.

from episode 2 with Ryan Shollenberger

[00:22:39.970] – Abby
What's your experience been facilitating math?

[00:22:43.870] – Ryan
I mean, it's been pretty great personally. It's funny. I think this is one of the stories I tell a lot of times when people ask me what I… You know, people say, "Oh, you're a teacher! What do you teach? What do you– what do you teach at your school?" And I always say math first and kind of laugh. Because math was always my weakest traditional subject in school. I didn't enjoy it. I didn't particularly get things the way they were taught.

[00:23:08.810]
I don't think I was "bad" at math in quotation marks. I know people say that a lot. But I was definitely not good at it enough to, like, care to work really hard to get better at it. In any event, you know, as you know, we had a volunteer math– math facilitator for the first two years, maybe two years of the school. And, you know, after that parent could no longer facilitate it anymore, I just sort of thought, well, I'm going to step in and do this.

[00:23:44.540]
And it wasn't necessarily out of necessity, but there were kids and-or families that still wanted there to be a math offering. And so I thought, right, I'll do this. And, you know, one of my original intentions behind that was to, you know, practice math concepts on my own when kids were, you know, directly requiring my help. And so that kind of became this thing where we– we all worked through different content, usually on Khan Academy.

[00:24:13.760]
And, you know, there's definitely, like, special projects. Like when people are actually working on things in math that have some other, you know, greater meaning beyond just practicing problems– Like, for example, I'll work on my fantasy baseball research a few weeks before my drafts every spring. But, you know, it's a place we're all working through math content at our own pace. And we're– I'm there to help kids when they get stuck. And I was very clear with some of our teenagers a few years ago, like, when they were getting into more

advanced math — calculus, trigonometry — I was like, “Listen, some of this stuff I haven’t done.

[00:24:48.020]
So I really I can’t tell you from a place of expertise. I can– I can help you. We can work through it together. But it’s not going to be, like, a concept that I have mastery of better than you.” Which I think is a really interesting place to come from as a facilitator, because in most school environments, like, you are meant to be the one that holds more knowledge and mastery of the skills you are teaching. Right? And that’s not always how it looks at

[00:25:13.880]
an ALC. It’s not always how it looks in a self directed learning environment. So, you know, it’s also math was a way to, like, humble myself and show kids that it’s OK to not be great at everything. And you don’t have to only spend time on the things that you’re good at. You can spend time on things that you’re not good at, and they can be helpful. Like, you know, we talk about all the time, what content do you need?

[00:25:35.480]
And like, I think, you know, basic math skills are thing, most of us, we can agree are useful in life. And so, you know, that– that’s a… I think that’s reason enough to, like, to have that offering and to make it, you know, make it clear that you can practice something that you’re maybe not naturally inclined towards.

[00:25:56.960] – Abby
One of the things I appreciate about the maths offering — and I don’t hang out in the room even when it’s the physical room, but — is it is very collaborative.

[00:26:09.680]
And I’m wondering, like, beyond, you know, reframing math as something people are already practicing — right? — and that’s relevant to their interests, and being transparent about your being someone practicing the skill set, are there things you do to set the space so it’s clear that the knowledge is in the room? And to inspire that collaboration?

[00:26:36.490] – Ryan
Yes. You know, as as people listening might know, most Agile Learning Centers are age-mixed and kids aren’t purposely separated by grade level. So one of the cool things that happens at math is there’s kids of different ages and different sort of levels of content, stuff they’ve that they’ve practiced or mastered already. And a lot of times kids will help each

other and support each other. And what they're doing in math– and, you know, as we've probably all heard many, many times, you learn something better when you teach it to others,

[00:27:08.980]
right? Or in this case, like, help facilitate it with others. — And so I think that's been one of the really cool ways that math has evolved. It's become less about me as the person holding it being the only one that can help. And kids know that they can help each other and actually kind of take pride and take joy in doing that. Like that. They can say, "Hey, this is, like, a skill that I've practiced before.

[00:27:33.920]
Let me show you how to do this." And I think it did start– it started a couple of years ago when a student sort of was like my co-facilitator in math. And I'll be honest with you, he had a higher level of mastery in a lot of math than I did so, you know, — and you know who I'm talking about — so I mean, I think that's when it started. But it's honestly expanded a lot in the past year since we've started doing math on Zoom twice a week.

[00:28:04.610]
And we've got, you know, normally multiple breakout rooms going. There's one or two students who like to do their own thing in the quiet room or pop back in if they have a question. Then there's another small core group who like to be in the same room and that will help each other. So, yeah, it's– it's been really fun to see how that's evolved and especially something that's, like, probably traditionally thought of as something that is tedious and not fun and, you know, kind of high anxiety.

[00:28:31.040]
This is definitely a low– a low level of anxiety math class, that's for sure.

[00:28:38.350] – Abby
As it ought to be, because math is cool. Do you want to talk a little bit about…Because you also have co-fa– I don't know about "co-facilitating"…Minecraft? The Minecraft worlds you've…done collaboratively?

[00:28:58.570] – Ryan
Oh man, that's– Minecraft has been a whole thread through the years of ALC. And it's been– it's interesting, too, because Minecraft is a game that is sort of endless. And its development in our world —

[00:29:13.460]
right? — has been kind of endless. There's updates and patches and things issued all the time, and they're always adding to it and expanding it. But oh, man, we've… We started the first year of the school. I think it was maybe October when I first played Minecraft. And, you know, I played a ton of video games growing up, so I could see immediately it was– it was very different. And it was very– it was intuitive in a way that, like, it's really easy to pick up.

[00:29:43.610]
But then you can tell that it's expansive as well. And there's so much you can learn from it and doing it. I mean, talking about math, like architecture, I mean, there's countries that are planning their cities using Minecraft now because of the one one meter square blocks being the scale. And I mean, it's just a lot of value in it. But, you know, I think some of the less obvious value in this relates to the worlds that we've built at ALC is that you can have, like, you can practice community. You know? And I think of a few students over the years that have been interested in that part to the extent that some have written entire constitutions and, you know, sort of very detailed rituals for these communities within Minecraft.

[00:30:32.180]
But we built an expansive world in the first year of the school. We called it No Cheats, because we wanted it to be a very strict survival server. And– and even that, now that I think of it, even, like, that sort of agreement making around 'what is this world going to look like, that we're building,' 'are we going to just, like, kill all the animals and harvest the crops and not replant stuff?' Or, like, when we, you know, knock off the top two layers of the wheat, are we going to replant the seeds immediately?

[00:31:04.160]
And those are some of the really cool lessons and some of the really cool value that I've seen come out of Minecraft over the years. It's like practicing community building, which of course, we're doing as well IRL (in real life) in ALCs. I mean…So yeah, Minecraft is great. I mean, you know, I think, you know, at one point we stopped just hosting a local world. We had a server and kids from other ALCs started to join.

[00:31:33.620]
And then there was a whole new set of agreements, because it was like, oh, you know, there's kids from other places who maybe we don't know. And, like, maybe their perceptions of what is acceptable on a Minecraft server are different than ours. So, you know, as Minecraft is expansive, you know, the more I talk here, I'm thinking of more and more ways that it's– it's been an influence for us. But, yeah, I don't know if that's the answer to your original question.

from episode 4 with Julia Cordero

Abby
Sometimes people will ask me when they're starting ALCs, they're like, can you be a facilitator and a parent? Can you have parents facilitate and… and they want a blanket answer. They want a universal yes or no.

Julia
Yeah, I mean, I can say as an example, I opened a daycare when my first child was young, 18 months, and it was horrible. Like I said, because of the particular style of attachment that is that– that is in our relationship.

It was impossible for me to do my job because the need he had for me to really be like giving him undivided attention was so strong. And when he didn't get it, it would be like, quote unquote "temper tantrums" or like, you know… There would be this sort of like a behavioral reaction. And so it was really impossible. It was– I ended up leaving that daycare, actually, because I had adopted my second child shortly after that.

So…It was a surprise adoption. If you've ever heard of such a thing. It happens. So, yeah, it wouldn't have worked as much as with the calm attachment that it worked with. And there were still hard days for sure. But I felt like we could navigate them with communication and clarification of boundaries. That Anthony was very helpful, like, keeping boundaries clean. So, yeah, it is like you're saying, there's really not one answer. It depends on a whole lot of factors.

Abby
Yeah. And the ability to hold space for the answer to change, as, you know, among your kids and as you're all at different stages in your relationships. It's, like, it's a super complex thing to navigate. Did you and Anthony have conversations to arrange boundaries or about ways he could help you while you were parenting and facilitating? Thinking about my first kind of SDE experience, there was a day where a parent who had his kids there, like, pulled me aside the first day kind of thing and was like, "here's what's happening.

Here's what I need from you when there's a conflict or when they get hurt or whatever."

Julia
Yeah, I would say it was it was pretty much the same thing. I tried to stay checked in a lot with Anthony. Yes, definitely. We had those kinds of explicit– Anthony and I had those

conversations, my child and I had those explicit conversations, that Anthony's the person you go to– that should really be your default person while you're here. And I tried to do a lot of checking in, too, for fear of– because I had that experience with my first child at the daycare,

I think I was hypersensitive to it. So I was trying to stay checked in as well with Anthony. Like, are there places that I'm crossing boundaries, that I'm being unfair? I also think I have a natural ability to be, you know, I'm not a parent who lets my kid get away with stuff in that situation. I'm almost, like, harder on my kids. So I sort of do the opposite of what people fear, but, like, to a fault.

There were times when I really had to have that conversation with my son where I was like, "listen, this is this is a place I go to. If you're doing something that's out of bounds, like, I'm more inclined to, like, actually be rude to you and I'm sorry for that" and trying to kind of explain that and navigate that. So I think it was a lot of conversations with– with both Anthony and with my child.

Abby
Were there things, specific things that Anthony did that were helpful for you, or that you did for yourself, that were really helpful for you?

Julia
Yeah, I mean, definitely figuring out with my own kid there I really just had to have a really firm boundary with my own child. There wasn't, you know, where as like with another child I might like sort of quote unquote, like, talk it out, with my own child I had to really be like, "and you hit the boundary." And now… That was really important for me to figure out. So, for instance, my son was at my checkpoint for a while and I sort of tried at first– I was like, it's really not working.

Like, he would disengage or he would, like, walk away in the middle of meeting. Things that were just like, you know, he's a kid who picks up social cues easily. So it wasn't that he was just– I mean, I think it's just testing his boundaries. I'm his mom, you know, and he's like, what can I do? Which is, like, a really natural part of development that other young people in the space…. They don't have that need with me, because I'm not their parent, so I think what I– what I ultimately said was like, you can't be my checkpoint anymore. Like, this is not working.

And so I think being able to find that kind of a firm boundary with him and realizing I have to get to that quicker because there's something else going on in the dynamic… Another kid might be like, do they not pick up social cues? Do they not understand what I say? You know? I check in with their parent and see if, like, is there something…Is it hard for them to write? And so, like, they're resistant to that?

Is there someone in the group they're struggling with? I just had to learn to be, like, a lot quicker in that process with my own kid. To really say, like, you can't– we can't do this, like, mother-child dynamic here. That's not what school is. We can do that all day at home. But when we're at school, this is the boundary.

Abby
Thank you. Yeah.

Julia
Yeah. No, thank you for saying that. I hadn't actually thought about that.

And I will say too, you know, there were– there were– So while, because there were times when, because Anthony was his go to, as a parent, there were times when I didn't like the way Anthony was responding. And it was so hard to just figure out, like when to shut up and when to speak up. Being that I have unlimited access to Anthony, like another parent wouldn't have that, you know? And like, was it a really big deal or was it just really important for my son to have a relationship with Anthony and they have their own dynamic, and that's OK?

That was, like, really excruciating for sure. Probably one of the hardest parts. Does that make sense, that perspective?

Abby
Yeah, no, absolutely, and it's not a thing that I would have thought to ask about, but as soon as you say that, I'm like, oh, I've definitely, like, co-facilitated with a parent and either, like… Sometimes it's that I'm circling up with them afterwards asking about and maybe gently coaching them on navigating a situation — which is a whole thing as a non parent, to be like, where do I speak up and where…?

Where is that not my place? — And also, it's definitely been the opposite, where they're like, "Oh, your dynamic with my kid." And it's either, you know, some of my expectations are

different, or I'm letting them climb too high in the tree. We have different feelings about whether you need a helmet when you ice skate. That kind of stuff.

Julia
Yes.

Abby
And just the complexity of — in a society that kind of worships a narrow version of a nuclear family — less and less, but still so —

sometimes it was like, parents not being sure what their kid's dynamic with me was and being like, "are you…" You know, "You're allo-parenting. And I don't know that I like that. I want my kid to come get help from me." So it's like, all of those emotional components.

Julia
Yeah. And mine was like… And I'm sure that, like, race and gender are involved in this, too, for sure. But mine was often– a lot of times was about when my child was irritated at something Anthony did, because they're sensitive in certain ways. And either Anthony wasn't reading that sensitivity — I mean, of course, I can read my child backwards and forwards. Not that I'll always be able to, but like, at a younger age, as a parent, it's easier to do that.

And what of that had to do also with being a white woman? Just around, like, just being very protective of his emotional state and then feeling like Anthony would do things to agitate his personal state, his emotional state, and knowing that my son's going to have a certain reaction to that. Watching it happen, having my son want to talk about it later, and just trying to figure out like, how do I, you know, similar to what you're saying of like, how do I empower this relationship that he has with Anthony?

Because it has its own dynamics. And Anthony is not necessarily the person that can read every gesture on your face and what emotion it corresponds to. And that's OK. We wouldn't expect him to do that. That's because that's not the nature of your relationship with him. So, you know, and then how does that– how does that fall into– how does that relate to gender? Two of them both having identity around being boys. And what does it mean to be emotional or not emotional or not read each other's emotions?

My son is mixed and Anthony's Black. Like, are there racial and, like, cultural pieces going on there that I'm trying to interrupt with what I think is right, because I'm like a white woman Mommy? Like, "it's not the right way to respond. My kid is very upset. Now, can't you tell

you're not doing the right thing? You've upset my child now." So I hadn't really dug into it. And so you just asking the question… But looking back, all those kinds of dynamics were coming up.

And they were hard. I mean, I'm thankful that, like, I did know– that I had some awareness around it and that I had to learn to say to my kid, like, if you're really upset about this, it sounds like something you need to bring up with Anthony. If you don't feel like you can bring it up with Anthony but you want to, like, I'm happy to support you in that. But I'm not going to like, you know, make another adult out to be a bad guy with you.

I'm not going to– there was like, wanting to be joined and like, didn't– didn't Anthony do something that I didn't like and isn't that bad? And you should fix this for me. And it's like, learning how to just back away and be not butting into his relationship.

Appendix IV: Experiences from Some ALFs and Directors in Latin America

Some facilitators and directors of Agile Learning Centers and communication about Agile Learning in Latin America got together to talk about the beginning of their projects, the challenges they face, and other inspiring stories for those who, like them, intend to create and sustain spaces for Self-Direction.



Experiencias de algunas ALF y directoras en Latinoamérica

https://vimeo.com/569501442/93701789b0

(Misc.)

Una Aventura Llamada Desescolarización

Blog posts on: Change-Up meeting / Culture Creation

Creating Culture, Year After Year

End of Year Rituals

Change Up Change Up

Making Wishes to Create Culture

Scaling Trust: A Δ-Up to Change-Up

Tone-Setting Camping Trip

On Relationships

Adult Day of Play

Blog posts on: Agile Tools for Active Facilitation

Daily Intention Board

Piloting Wings: Challenge Sprints [Part 1]

Piloting Wings: Challenge Springs [Part 2]

Blog posts on: Facilitation Challenges and Opportunities

Mindful Minecrafting